

Living on Dishonest Wealth

For Fred Herzog

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, Psalm 79:1-9, I Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13

Stanley M. Hauerwas

Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

A few years ago I was asked to give a lecture at Houston Baptist University in their business school. Since they were Southern Baptist and they had a business school they wanted their business school to be “ethical.” They had endowed an annual lectureship in business ethics and I was to give one of the initial lectures. I had entitled my lecture, “Why Business Ethics is a Bad Idea.” In the lecture I suggested most business ethics is really but a form of quandary ethics that focuses on situations and as a result misses the real moral challenges before us.

Before the lecture we were having one of the obligatory dinners. During it the associate dean of the business school had told me she was a member of the Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas. That is the church that has between six and seven thousand members and ordinarily grows each Sunday by a hundred or two hundred new members.

After my lecture, she observed she found the lecture pessimistic if not cynical. She suggested surely there was something they could do to make their business school more ethical. I observed that I certainly felt that there was, but they would have to begin a good deal earlier than business school. I suggested before they let anyone join the Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas, they ought to have the prospective member turn to the congregation and make public what they earn. “I make \$35,000 a year and I want to be a member of Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas.” “I make \$185,000 a year and I want to be a member of Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas.” “I make \$65,000 a year and I want to be a member of Second Baptist Church of Houston, Texas.” She observed that they could not do that. I said, “Why?” and she said “Well, that’s private.”

All I could think is where were the fundamentalists when you needed them! In the book of Acts we are told, after all, that Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because they refused to reveal honestly to the church what they had made on the selling of property. The early church seems to have known nothing of the distinction between the public and the private, particularly when it came to money matters. The truth of the matter is that as Christians today we would rather tell one another, if it was absolutely necessary, what we do in our bedrooms before we have to tell one another what we make. Which is but an indication of what we really care about.

But the Lukan text simply will not let us avoid that which we really care about—that is, our money and our property. Of course, it is such an odd text that clever people like us find ways to make this parable die of a thousand qualifications. After all, the parable just seems out of character for those of us who would be Christian. Is Jesus really commending the dishonest steward? It certainly seems that He is, insofar as we are told, “Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into an eternal home.” What in the world are we to make of that? So we become fascinated by questions about how to interpret this parable that seems to commend dishonesty and forget that Jesus is making a claim

about our money.

Moreover the following bit of wisdom that follows the parable gives us something to think about—that is, that those faithful in a little can be trusted to be faithful in much. And those who are dishonest in a little can also certainly be trusted to be dishonest in much. So Jesus tells us that if we have not been faithful with our dishonest wealth, how can He trust us with the gospel? The gospel it seems is what this is really about. Money is just an example in service to this larger issue.

Often interpretations of this parable concentrate on the final verse in which we are told that no slave can serve two masters. We are told, it seems, we must choose between God and wealth which usually turns out to mean we should not try to find our security in our money. In other words, the advice about two masters is usually interpreted as an attitude problem. We should not trust in our money but rather we ought to trust in God. So it really does not matter whether we have a lot of money because the issue involves the attitude we take toward the money we have. But if it's just an attitude problem, I would much rather have an attitude problem about a Porsche than my '83 Toyota Corolla with the dent in the fender.

I think such readings, however, have no basis in this text. Jesus does not suggest that the problem is the attitude we take toward God and/or wealth. Rather He tells us quite frankly if we have money we are in trouble when it comes to getting into the Kingdom of Heaven. It is just hard to be saved when you have a lot of money. We do not particularly like to hear that because we know, that is, we white Americans, that we have a lot of money. Of course we do not have the money of the really rich in this society but if you are white and an American, you are rich. Indeed I think we put up with the really rich in an effort to convince ourselves that compared to them we are not “really” rich. Therefore we do not have a problem about being rich since we are not really rich.

Yet I do not think the realism of Jesus in this parable will let us off the hook. As people who have money, we simply have to also acknowledge that it is dishonest money. We tell ourselves that we have worked hard, and we no doubt have, and we deserve what we have got. But the very fact that we have been able to work hard and thus assume that we deserve what we have gotten is because we are white Americans. We had the good luck to be born into good homes that had the habits that would make us a success in the kind of economic world in which we find ourselves. But the luck of our birth is based, of course, on the fact that our wealth is the result of dishonest appropriation.

I am, of course, enough of a Marxist to believe that all capital is unjust to the extent capital is appropriation from those who have had the misfortune of being born without property. Most capitalists are not themselves unjust but rather they simply inherit the practices of injustices. The truth of the matter is that all wealth is the result of murder. Consider, for example, the presumption that the land we currently stand on is ours. What made it ours? What made it ours is of course the killing of native Americans so that we could appropriate the land for our purposes. In Hegel's words, “history is a slaughter-bench.”

Which brings us back to the stark realism of this parable. Jesus does not presume that we live in a world in which we get to choose between honesty or dishonesty. Rather, we live in a world in which we cannot help but be possessed by dishonest habits and unjust systems. For example Jesus tells us “No slave can serve two masters,”

which seems to presume that we have a choice between being a slave and not being a slave. In contrast Jesus presumes that in fact we are enslaved. Moreover, we are never more enslaved than when we think we are masters of our destiny so that we can choose between being honest or dishonest in how we deal with our wealth.

I imagine by this point you're beginning to have a good deal of sympathy with the associate dean of the business school at Houston Baptist University. This all just sounds too pessimistic. Surely there is some salvation in this. After all, aren't sermons suppose to be "good news"? Has God really abandoned us to a world of such dishonesty and injustice? Is all we have left a Jeremiah-like response of mourning? "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." And if we are not saved, what in the world are we doing in church Sunday after Sunday?

I wish I had a good answer to that question. I have no doubt that in the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth we are a people who have been constituted for God's salvation of God's creation. I believe that such a people is rightly called church. I believe, moreover, that such a people have been given the means to discover even in our enslavement to the powers that rule this world ways of being of service to one another as God's good people. I believe one of the ways we are of service to one another is by telling one another the truth. The truth that we are enjoying the results of injustice cannot be avoided. Moreover, I cannot even pretend that the knowledge of the truth that we are enjoying the fruits of injustice will save us. It's more likely to make us even less able to acknowledge who we are because we do not know what to do about the knowledge that we are a people who flourish because others do not.

Being generous with our wealth is a good. But our generosity will not save us. Rather what we must face is the only thing that can save us is that our God is a generous God who offers us forgiveness of our sins—sins that are all the more powerful because we cannot will our way out of them. We are caught, but God has freed us from our "caughtness" through Jesus Christ. God has made us part of God's very life through Word and Sacrament. Through Word and Sacrament let us be consumed as a people who are seldom captured by God's generosity. To be so consumed, after all, means we have no reason to tell one another lies about our righteousness.

So our salvation begins with the confession of the sin of our dishonesty and in that confession we no longer need to pass on histories of righteousness that deny that we come from injustice. Let us therefore seek to be reconciled with ourselves and with our brothers and sisters, asking one another to help us understand what we are to do with the fact that we are wealthy, and yet still God's people. Our salvation is that God has given us one another and in that giving we discover that we are no longer slaves, but friends of one another and of God and perhaps we can even be friends with those who suffer because we are wealthy. That does, indeed, seem to be "good news."