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An Accounting

Tim Nafziger lives in the Ventura River watershed on the traditional lands of the Chumash people in Southern California. He works as a digital consultant, web developer, writer, photographer and organizer. *Anabaptist World* recently published his article, “Of quilts and power”. He had asked some of his friends on facebook to list Mennonite “status markers.” These are the status markers they identified:

-The high school or college attended (Mennonite is better)

-Being a pastor, missionary, or service worker

-Doing social justice work (if you are white)

-Bidding a lot of money on a quilt at a Mennonite Central Committee auction

-Family affiliation with European Mennonite settlers in North America (having a ‘Mennonite’ last name)

-Ability to sing in four-part harmony (bonus if you can sight read)

-Gardening

-Cooking from the *More-with-less* or *Simply in Season* cookbooks

The point is that we need to be aware of our “status markers’; they may be invisible to newcomers, making it difficult to feel welcome. They can also affect how decisions are made and the power dynamics in the congregation. Although some of these grow out of our faith, there is a cultural element that we need to be aware of.

Our text today is a difficult one. I wish I could hear it with first century ears. To my twenty-first century ears, it seems a strange parable for Jesus to tell. Why is a dishonest estate manager commended? What is Jesus telling us in this parable?

So to begin, a few observations: this parable is sandwiched between the parable of the prodigal son with the forgiving father and the story of the rich man and Lazarus, a parable which reverses the status of the two in the afterlife. Both our current text and the latter parable begin with the words, “There was a rich man.” All three texts talk about money, or wealth. The prodigal son “squanders” his inheritance. The dishonest manager is accused of “squandering” his employer’s property. Although the term “squandering” is not used in the third parable, we are told that the rich man “feasted sumptuously” every day, even though the poor hungry Lazarus lay outside his gate. All three parables feature an unexpected twist or turn that changes everything. The prodigal son becomes destitute, returns to his father to be a servant, but is welcomed home as a beloved son. The dishonest manager reduces the debts of his employer’s debtors and so makes “friends” for himself, and the rich man dies and is tormented in Hades while the poor Lazarus is welcomed by Abraham in heaven.

I also want to note that in Luke’s Gospel, the three parables are told in the context of Jesus’ interactions with the Pharisees. Chapter 15 of Luke begins with these words, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus, And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” This was something that the Pharisees would not do. For the Pharisees, status, class, ritual purity, were all important.

This statement in Luke 15 is followed by a number of parables about the kingdom of God, including parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, lost prodigal son, and then our text today, told to the disciples, of the dishonest manager, which is followed by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Luke reports that the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, responded to these parables with ridicule.

So if our text today is a kingdom parable, what does it mean? What is it telling us about the kingdom of God? We recognize that the earth and all that is in it belongs to God. In that sense we, too, are managers of wealth, be that money or land or the environment, resources that do not belong to us but to our Creator. Perhaps we are not so different from the dishonest manager as we would like to believe. The parable asks us to consider, to account, for the ways we manage the gifts that God has provided for us. We, too, are called to account for how we care for the environment, the world that God created. We, too, are called to account for how we manage whatever amount of “wealth” God has given us. The manager in our parable today was not wealthy, but he was not poor either. His status in terms of material wealth may have been comparable to many of us. We are asked to consider how faithful we are in caring for what God has provided for us.

But there is more to the parable than this. Each of the three parables I compared earlier also deals with the interaction of wealth, or status, and relationships. The prodigal son had friends who helped him spend his money and then disappeared. It was his father whose relationship to him was not based on wealth but on loyalty and love, on faithfulness. The rich man who withheld help from Lazarus, feasting while Lazarus starved, discovered too late that wealth could not serve him in the end, but that his relationship with his neighbor was more important. It was the dishonest manager in our parable today who recognized that he needed friends, relationships of mutual dependence that broke down barriers of class and status.

These parables suggest that class and status are not what is important in God’s kingdom. In fact, they suggest that class and status is turned upside down. Lois Malcolm grew up in the Philippines as the daughter of missionaries. She is recognized as a professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She writes of the dishonest manager, “Even though he is still a sinner looking out for his own interests (6:32-34), he models behavior the disciples can emulate. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him and others. By reducing other people’s debts, he creates a new set of relationships based not on the vertical relationship between lenders and debtors (rooted in monetary exchange) but on something more like the reciprocal and egalitarian relationships of friends. What this dishonest manager sets in play has analogues with what happens when the reign of God emerges among us (17:21). Old hierarchies are overturned and new friendships are established. Indeed, outsiders and those lower down on hierarchies now become the very ones we depend upon to welcome us – not only in their homes in this life, but even in the ‘eternal homes (6:20-26).”

So what about us? We, too, are called to account for our relationships, for the ways we use power and the ways we care for, or refuse to care for, our neighbors and our brothers and sisters in the church. I admit that I enjoy playing the “Mennonite game”—finding connections through Mennonite related markers—such as names, education, things we have in common. But those markers dare not be allowed to define who we are as a community of faith. God’s table is wide and long and there is room for all. As a community of faith, we must be defined by our love for each other no matter who we are or where we come from. We must be defined by the way we follow Jesus together.

We sometimes begin our worship with these words: no matter who you are, or what your experiences have been, you are welcome here at our church. We welcome your participation, your questions, your presence. These cannot be empty words, but must be the way we order our life together in community with Christ as the center. It needs to inform not only our relationships in this service, but also our relationships with PIM, Primera Iglesia Menonita, our brothers and sisters who worship in the late service.

The dishonest manager is commended, not because he is dishonest, but because he is wise in establishing new relationships of mutual dependence, where each has something to offer and something to receive. That’s the way of things in God’s kingdom, where the last shall be first and the first last, and where the least is the greatest of all.

“We are pilgrims on a journey; we are travelers on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load. “ (*vs. 2 Will You Let Me be Your Servant*). May we have the grace to be servants to each other, seeking together to follow Jesus’ way of reconciliation, forgiveness, and peacemaking, recognized as Jesus’ followers by our love for one another.