

Most of the commentaries that I read about our Gospel today characterize it as one of the more difficult of Jesus' parables. At best it is confusing and at worst that it makes no sense at all. And I agree that upon first hearing it is both of those. But there are some clues as to what Jesus is trying to say. First, Luke makes it clear that Jesus is addressing his disciples and not the crowd as a whole.

From the ninth chapter of Luke to the end of the eighteenth chapter, he is chronicling Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Jesus knows that this journey will be his last with these followers, and I believe that is why we hear so many of Jesus' parables in these pages. In fact, over the last several months we have heard no fewer than twelve parables that are only found in Luke. Most of the parables are told to the crowd as a whole, some are told to the Pharisees, and some are told specifically to his disciples. The parable we heard today is clearly directed to his disciples, although he knows that the Pharisees can hear his words. He tells a story about a manager, or steward, who, after losing his job goes about reducing the debts of those that owe his master goods or money. When the master discovers he has been cheated he commends the manager because "the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Whatever does this mean? Is Jesus commending the steward's illegal activity? Is this how Jesus wants us to behave?

There are dozens of scholarly dissertations on the differences between how business was done in the time of Jesus to justify what Jesus might have been getting at in this parable, but I think the meaning of it has much less to do with business dealings, or even specifically money. Jesus is not commending the steward for being dishonest, he

is commending him for being shrewd, and perhaps the parable's meaning is couched in the meaning of the word shrewd. In ancient Greek, the word is phronimos which has a variety of translations all of which relate to behavior which demonstrates knowledge, wisdom and discernment. Be world wise, Jesus is telling his disciples. And use that wisdom not for your own benefit, as the steward did, but for the benefit of the kingdom of God. Knowledge, wisdom and discernment are the cornerstones of Jesus' teaching, and perhaps in cornerstone of all our teaching, even today.

When I taught, there were many times when my students would complain about learning history. They couldn't see the value in knowing about what had happened so long ago. At twelve or thirteen, they were too naïve to understand that what history shows us is that human beings have been doing the same absurd and nonsensical things over and over since the beginning of time. We all know this; history repeats itself, and I believe that Jesus is trying to use this parable to tell his disciples to wise up, hone their shrewdness, so that they can see the difference between the way that the world works and the possibilities that exist in the kingdom of God.

I have had glimpses of this difference throughout my life. As a student at the University of California, Berkeley, I was immersed in the hippy culture of that time, and saw firsthand the struggles and skirmishes between the established culture and a new generation that had a different take on how the world should run. We were idealistic and had lofty expectations, but we were also very naïve. We were not shrewd managers at all. At nineteen or twenty, we were lucky to be able to manage ourselves much less anything else. We may have had knowledge, but we lacked wisdom and discernment. The children of the 60s ended up changing the world,

but only when we realized what that change meant taking responsibility for something beyond ourselves.

This year is the 50th anniversary of Woodstock; a rock festival in upstate New York that became synonymous with my generation. Joni Mitchell's song idolizes the three days, "We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." This song characterized Woodstock as a magical experience. But what struck me while watching the documentaries of that event was not the magic of Woodstock, but the hard work that went into just keeping it going. The organizers ran out of food, clean water, toilets and supplies and lost a lot of money. The fence around the festival broke down and people streamed in for free, and it rained on off almost the entire three days creating mountains of mud. While most of the 400,000 people reveled in good music and free love, there were a handful of people working night and day just to provide basic needs to them. When it became obvious that the musicians would not be able to drive in because of the huge traffic jam, the organizers flew them in in helicopters. The people in the small town of Bethel, New York brought in food out of their own pantries, and a small group of people who had been brought in to maintain security used their mandate to set up food line that fed hundreds of people. And at the end of the festival, it took tens of thousands of dollars to clean up Max Yasgur's 600-acre dairy farm. Woodstock was a phenomenon not so much because of the music or the big names who performed, but because it stands as an example of a profoundly Christian message; we are here to share with others. Perhaps the miracle of Woodstock was the willingness of a few to use their resources for something bigger than themselves, realizing that there was nothing in it for them but the satisfaction of a job well done. And perhaps the lesson of

Woodstock was that when those resources are used for the welfare of the many, it benefits us all.

But the word resources means more than money. Resources are assets, and in the case of our relationship with God they are the gifts we are given. Resources are our skills, our experience, our talents, and our time, as well as our treasure. And to use them well, we must educate ourselves first about what those resources are within us, and then find out how those resources might be used for others. In our reading from Timothy today, we are told to pray. Pray for how to discern your gifts. Pray to live a life beyond yourself. Pray so that you might do something beautiful for God. That is what the end of the parable is asking us to do; serve God. It is only through wisdom and discernment that we can find what that means to each of us, but it is imperative as Christians that each of us finds what God is asking of us. Who or what will you serve? Or in the words of Bob Dylan:

...You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.