

The 20th Sunday After Pentecost: Holy Squanderers
September 22, 2019
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Since I seem to be a child of this age, you should know that sometimes the first place I read the lessons for an upcoming Sunday is on my phone. This happened just last week. We were out of town, and I can't even remember when or where it was that I decided to pull up the link to the Revised Common Lectionary on my handheld device, as we modern preachers do. The gospel lesson can at least begin to marinate a bit in my mind once I've read it, even if I don't get around to consulting the commentaries and other sense-making resources until later.

Unfortunately, reading the Parable of the Dishonest Manager in tiny iPhone text doesn't make its problems any smaller. The only thing helpful about reading a story as weird as this one on a mobile device is that it's easy to say, "You know, I think I'll untangle that knot another day. Maybe there's something more fun and less perplexing somewhere else on the Interwebs." So, I surfed on over to a site I like called Mockingbird.

And there I found a bunch of black and white images by a photographer named Eric Pickersgill. The series is titled "Removed." And the photos are of ordinary people in ordinary situations and poses. But here's the conceit. Eric Pickersgill has erased the mobile devices that the people had been holding when the pictures were taken.

Maybe you can imagine that the results can be a little eerie. There's a couple in bed together, back to back, each staring in opposite directions at their own empty hands. Two guys in cargo shorts and flip flops flank a Webber charcoal grill, each looking at his palm as if he either doesn't quite recognize it or has recently set it down in something disgusting. There are four women in a garage, smoking cigarettes, but looking, again, at their own cupped and empty hands instead of one another.

A man tends a smoker in a suburban driveway as his wife sits cross-legged on the tailgate of a truck. Both of them, of course, are looking at their hands. But there's a third person in this frame. A boy holding an axe handle and looking directly into the camera. His stare is blank and stoic and the subject of his gaze seems to be me, as I, of course, look into my phone and back at him. This boy is the emptiness Eric Pickersgill would have erased into my hand. And either my discomfort or the boy's unflinching look seems to ask, "So what kind of attention do you pay and to what do you pay it?"

I don't think approaching the parable of the Dishonest Manager as a story about attention solves its many difficulties. But the question of how fully we throw ourselves into something does seem to animate this strange story, doesn't it? What captivates your time and your attention? On what do you spend your very best shrewdness? These questions can be as disconcerting as the boy by the meat smoker's stare.

But before we go to work further on the parable for today, let's set it in its context. Because this passage is actually a continuation of a teaching that began a whole chapter earlier.

Luke chapter 15 begins, "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.'" The text says Jesus responded with "a parable," but we usually think of it as three.

First there is a story about a sheep that wanders off from 99 others, and Jesus says the good shepherd will leave the 99 and rush off after the lost one and rejoice once he's brought it safely home.

Then there's the story of a woman with ten silver coins who, if she loses just one, will turn her house inside out, sweep every nook and corner until she finds what is lost and rejoice once she finds it.

And finally there's a story about a man who had two sons. The younger son asked for his inheritance early and went off and *squandered* it in dissolute living. You remember the rest. After getting up from the pig sty and making his way back home, he can't even begin the groveling confession he'd been rehearsing in his head before the father has wrapped him in his arms and given orders to throw a party, for his lost and beloved son has been found!

Got it? People who everyone would really rather just keep far, far away — tax collectors and sinners — heard that in God's economy the lost and the least are precious and sought after and received with open arms. Even squanderers... maybe *especially* squanderers... are loved because they're of infinitely more worth than any of the temporal stuff they might have wasted. And because it is the nature of the One who welcomes them to embrace and to rejoice.

Chapter 15 ends with the father trying to explain to the older brother, who is still seething with resentment, that all that he has is this son's as well. But all the older son can see is the injustice of this ridiculous economy of grace. What holds his attention makes all the difference. He can somehow be in the midst of a story of grace and cut off from it at once. Maybe we all can. Maybe we can still stare off into emptiness while other people sit nearby, maybe just as lonely. Maybe just as lost. But just as invited to the party as we are.

Well. It is immediately on the heels of these parables of grace that Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property..."

First you might have noticed that there's been more squandering. Same word in Greek for what the Prodigal Son did and what the Dishonest Manager did: squandered. Wasted. Perfectly good worldly goods are lost again. One might begin to think Jesus likes to see possessions dribble away from us.

But this story seems different. Jesus is pretty clear in the last chapter that he's telling people who the world keeps calling lost that they are being sought out, welcomed, and loved by God. But this time, Jesus says he's telling us a story about life in one realm to teach a lesson to people who are trying to live in another.

Specifically, he's telling a story about shrewdness in the realm of "dishonest wealth," that children of light, disciples of the realm of grace he's been trying to teach about, should apply to their own lives.

There's nowhere else in Jesus's teaching where he commends betraying the person above you to save your own skin. In fact, I'd argue that there's almost no self-preservation at all in the teachings of Jesus. He's much more likely to tell you you'll have to lose your life if you're going to save it.

And what he may be telling us is to turn our attention to the realm of grace as intensely as a desperate, dishonest manager will try to save his own skin when he's scared. Which is why the older son in the parable of the Prodigal may be the hinge between the stories.

What you give over your most intense attention to will make all the difference in your life. Grace can be all around us, but if we're caught in a world view that trusts in what we make of ourselves, we'll be as oblivious as a resentful son at a party he's been invited to but still can't let himself enjoy.

Years ago a priest told me that grace is like being given the keys to a Ferrari and told it's all yours. But if you don't believe it and never walk out to the garage to take it for a spin, you'll keep living in a Ferrari-less world, won't you? This is why Jesus kept talking about the saving power of belief. What you believe... what you turn your most intense attention toward... This is the world you inhabit.

That priest didn't think abundant life took the form of a Ferrari. Frankly he knew that Ferraris can get in the way. He was telling a parable. And what his story meant was that even though the Creator of the universe is a God of grace who welcomes lost sinners and squanderers with blow out parties and wild rejoicing and wide-open arms, we can choose to keep living like people trying to save our own lives and paying resentful attention to who's gotten something they don't deserve.

But we don't have to. In fact, maybe the most wildly beautiful part of the parable is that when the dishonest manager gets desperate enough to have his shrewdest attention turned in a new direction, even he starts doling out grace. He starts cutting debts of a hundred by twenty... by fifty. He begins seeing his life as bound up with and dependent upon the grace of all these other people who might welcome him into their homes when he's in need. People he hopes will welcome him, you might say, like a certain father who opened his arms with rejoicing, not judgment, to a prodigal child who had just squandered away the last remnant a deadly old way of seeing, and come back to life.