

A young man in Montana bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However, when the next day arrived, the farmer reneged on his promise. "I'm afraid the horse has died," he explained. The young man said, "Well, then give me my money back." The farmer said, "Can't do that. I spent it already." The young man thought for a moment and said, "OK, then just bring me the dead horse."

The farmer asked, 'What are you going to do with a dead horse?' "I'm going to raffle it off," said the young man. "You can't raffle off a dead horse!" "Sure I can. Watch me. I just won't tell anybody he's dead."

A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked, "What happened with the dead horse?" "I raffled him off," the young man said, "I sold 500 tickets at \$2 a piece and made a profit of \$998...." "Didn't anyone complain?" the farmer asked. "Just the guy who won. So I gave him his \$2 back."

That's an enterprising young man. A con man. Something like the steward in today's gospel parable. Commentators say this parable is especially revealing because it shows that the early church already had problems with Jesus' parable material. A whole series of commentaries has been attached to it, all of them relating to the keyword 'mammon.' Their purpose is to explain the parable, protect it against misunderstandings, and draw the right conclusions from it. But Jesus does not 'protect' His challenging language. He uses daring images for the reign of God. And He tells stories that do not sound at all pious, like this one. This is not a pious story; it's the story of a crime. It tells of a double betrayal. It takes place in the Palestine of the time. There, in Jesus' time, the rich land in the valleys belonged to the 'state' or a few very rich owners of large estates. Most of these rich landowners lived elsewhere – in Antioch, Alexandria, or Rome – and had managers to take care of their property.

This manager embezzles the goods entrusted to him. He manages the money right into his own pocket. The owner apparently has no way of inspecting the books. He is exploited by his manager by every dishonest art in the book. But then, one day, someone fingers the manager. Who, the story does not say. The manager is then given a date by which he must lay all his accounts on the table.

The manager knows that he cannot conceal his embezzlement. He also knows that he is going to lose his position and has no chance of finding another. His future looks ruined.

So he undertakes an additional betrayal, and now more audaciously than before: he calls in his master's various debtors and has them rewrite their bills in their own favor and against the interests of his employer. In this way he lays obligations on people who will feel that they have to support him later. He creates 'the right of hospitality' for himself. Obligations of this sort played an extraordinary role in antiquity. There was no such thing as insurance, and there was no social welfare system. Obviously, the deceitful manager has the debtors come to him one at a time; there must not be any witnesses to this business. The amounts of his cheating are extraordinarily high: a hundred jugs of oil are about 3600 liters, the yield of some 145 olive trees. The quantity of wheat is similarly high.

How does the story end? We might ask instead: how would it end today? Probably on a high moral note. For example: the 2nd embezzlement is also discovered, the crook loses everything and goes to prison. Moral: crime does not pay! At any rate, that is how the story was told in the 18th and 19th centuries. In recent decades, however, it would probably have been given a social touch, criticized the unscrupulous nature of the

exploitative landowner, described the behavior of the manager and the indebted tenants as a bitterly necessary defense, and so made a story of social heroes out of a crime tale. In that case also the story would have turned out to be highly moral.

But what is so baffling is that Jesus's story does not end morally at all – neither according to bourgeois or antibourgeois morality. We can see how little the story was aimed at moral teaching in Jesus' mind by the fact that He does not even tell the end. That remains open; it is not interesting.

Apparently this story of a swindler is about something else entirely. The first commentary added to the tale is still aware of this: Jesus praises the criminal manager – 'the Lord' is obviously Jesus and not the injured landowner – but what He applauds is not his crime but the consistency and initiative with which he rescues his own existence.

In his own terms, the manager acted very consistently. He had no illusions. He considered his opportunities quite soberly. He used his mind. He engaged his whole imagination, and after calculating everything, he proceeded quickly and as efficiently as possible.

That – Jesus wants to tell His listeners – is just how we must act in the face of the reign of God. It is offered to us, now, today. But it will only come to us if we engage our minds, our imaginations, our passions, our whole existence. By far the best explanation of the parable is given in the last of the commentaries: "No slave can serve 2 masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Lk 16:13)

That is: those who want to live in the reign of God can only have God as their master. Only God may they serve – with their whole will, all their strength, their whole lives. If they have other masters besides God, they are divided, pulled here and there, have no drive. Then they do not really engage, they risk nothing, they do things only halfway. Then their lives lack all inner strength and all the brilliance that belongs to the reign of God.

The swindling manager did nothing halfway. He went all the way. He risked everything and invested everything. For that, and only for that, Jesus admires him and says: if only my disciples – on their own terms – would act as sensibly as this manager! We see that in His parables, Jesus not only depicts the world of the good and respectable, but also that of the shady and the hypocritical, the swindlers and the cheats. He does not depict a holy and intact world – in other words, a world that simply does not exist. (adapted from JESUS OF NAZARETH, James Martin, p. 106-106)

So, second, a word about commitment. Nothing in life that is worth anything can be done without commitment. The cheating manager was committed to his life and his lifestyle – and willing to do even bad things to accomplish that. To be a follower of Christ requires commitment. Too often we treat God, and the church, and our attention to our growth as disciples, as if it is an optional thing, a sideline kind of thing, something of little consequence, or perhaps something we might get to in retirement. It often means little to us compared to work, money, security, and family. But to be a baptized person is to have made a commitment. And to become a GOOD person, even a holy person – requires hard work and commitment. Commitment is often long, hard, demanding dedication to something greater than our own gain or comfort or self-expression or security. It is watching what we started with enthusiasm turn into demands of commitment, that can tempt us to despair. Yet, at the center of us, we know that the God who created us with this gift, this call, this talent, will surely sustain us in the doing of it. As if the God whose voice we follow

will ever abandon the good. As if waiting for God's good time was a waste of our time. As if God's love will ever fail us in the end. (adapted from Joan Chittister, FOLLOWING THE PATH, p. 138)

In 1947, a professor at the University of Chicago, Dr. Chandrasekhar, was scheduled to teach a class in advance astrophysics. The professor was living in Wisconsin, where he was doing research for an upcoming conference. His plan was to commute to Chicago twice a week, even though the class was held during the winter quarter and he would encounter the very worst weather the Midwest could throw at him. The professor had second thoughts about teaching the class when he heard that only 2 students had signed up for his course. He thought of the distance; he thought of the time away from his family; and he thought of the snow and ice. But then he thought of the 2 students. He decided to follow through on his commitment to teach. He had obviously hoped for more than 2 students, but he had made the promise to teach.

Ten years later, Dr. Chandrasekhar was very pleased to hear that the 2 young men who made up his class were progressing along quite nicely. Chen Ning Yang and Tsung-Dao Lee were both awarded the Nobel Prize in physics in 1957. In 1983, Dr. Chandrasekhar was awarded the same honor. It all happened because he was committed. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, May-June 2006)

Third, passion. Passion is what makes us keep our commitments. Passion is a matter of depth. To be passionately committed, passionately involved, passionately immersed in life, in God, is to be involved and immersed in the contradictions and mystery of it all. To know, to feel, to experience our own dying as a boy hangs on the gallows at Auschwitz. To realize our own shortcomings and capacities for wrongdoings when a politician resigns in disgrace. To realize the extent to which living involves dying, REALLY dying, and to know that to the extent that we are afraid to die, we are failing to live! In passion, we find our resources, our energy, our courage, our motivation, a Spirited way of being fully human, as Jesus was fully human. In passion, we are aware that we are infused by the Spirit of God – this is what birth is all about, what creation is, and what baptism signifies. We are created as a Spirited people – Holy Spirited people. Immersed in passion, we know that Christ and our faith have as much to do with the so-called secular arenas of our lives as the sacred; as much to do with 'this' world as with some 'other' world; as much to do with the 'profane' as with the 'holy.' As much to do with the 'sexual,' the political, the social, as with the 'spiritual.' This is why Jesus could tell a story about a scoundrel and know that there is a lesson for us if we choose to discover it.

The passionate person who is wise will realize that these dichotomies, these lines of demarcation, are ultimately false, and that God is every bit as present in the kitchen, the classroom, the hospital, the prison, the bed, as in church. The passionate person is one who can cut through to the heart of the matter – whatever the occasion – and discover God. Let the church say AMEN. (last section adapted from SERMONS FROM DUKE CHAPEL, Will Willmon)