

**BUSINESS SCHOOL THEOLOGY?
A Sermon by The Rev. Mary Marple Thies
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – September 18, 2022**

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

Andover Newton Theological Seminary at Yale Divinity School is the country's first seminary to require all M.Div. graduates to take classes in business administration. The requirement sends divinity students into what may be the alien territory of Yale's School of Management, where the idea of a higher power rests more in capitalism's "invisible hand" than in God's protective grace.

The school's administration considers this requirement to be a pragmatic response to a fraught reality. For decades, mainline Protestant denominations have been in steady decline. Pews grow emptier, church buildings are sold to developers, and even seminaries face uncertain futures. Under such difficult economic conditions, familiarity with business management might be a matter of survival for seminarians. Dean Sarah Drummond says, "The main concern is that our students learn enough about business and management that, when they [are] on their own in their work [of ministry], they've got the essential building blocks" to tackle business-related questions.¹

I speak for myself here—when I was in seminary, we spent most of our time studying the Bible, theology, and church history. The practical theology courses were on pastoral care, Christian education and preaching, not how to read a spreadsheet or develop a marketing plan or supervise a staff. I envy today's seminarians for not having to figure out those things on the fly.

I wonder if the folks at Andover Newton, were inspired by today's parable in which a manger is commended for being shrewd and resourceful for his handling of finances. I suspect not, because most church pros are just as puzzled by this odd story as the gospel writer, Luke, must have been. He gives us Jesus' little story, but then tacks on three different explanations at the end, any one of which could be the basis for a sermon and none of which really seem to solve our confusion about the parable. So I propose that we not worry about the explanations at the end, which may well have been a random collection of Jesus' sayings that Luke simply appended to the parable because they all had to do with money. We could try to tie them all together, but I think that Jesus has given us enough to chew on with just the parable, so let's see what we can unravel in this story that comes to us, as one commenter put it, courtesy of the business school rather than the divinity school.ⁱⁱ

Here are some of the challenges we have with this story. To begin, it doesn't seem to tell us anything about the coming reign of God. It involves, corruption, lying, and undue influence. There is nothing that gives us a model or instruction on how the people of God are supposed to act.

It also doesn't give us any obvious good guys. First, there is the rich landowner. In first century Galilee, wealthy landlords generally were loan sharks. They used ridiculously high interest rates to make it nearly impossible for the poor to pay off their loans, so that peasants would be forced to sell their family land to the landlord. This particular rich man gives us a clue as to his

moral standing when he doesn't give his employee a chance to defend himself against the accusation of cheating. He simply fires the guy, only later to commend the accused for his shrewdness.

And what about that employee? Is he worth emulating? He is the manager of the rich man's property, the one responsible for making sure that the tenants are using the land appropriately, that they are not just sitting around twiddling their thumbs, but planting and nurturing the crops to bring in a good harvest so the landowner gets his due. The accusation is that he has not been doing his job, so he is fired on the spot with no severance and no references. His future looks pretty grim. Now the manager is also the collection agent and it would not be unusual for him to pad the rent with his own commission. We don't know if he did that, but we do know that when he loses his job, he does a little fast dealing with the tenants. He offers them terrific deals to take 20% to 50% off their bills. And to cover his tracks, he has the debtors write their own invoices.

Even the poor guys at the bottom of this heap, the tenants, come off badly. They don't seem to hesitate at all when offered the illicit discounts on their loans.

So Jesus gives us this account of a bunch of people without a decent ethic among them. These clearly are not nice people, so we may find it challenging to find someone to admire or who comes up to our ethical standards. After all, none of us has ever cheated on our taxes or told a lie or exceeded the speed limit or gossiped or looked at someone lustfully or intentionally put someone down or.... Well, maybe we shouldn't try to judge these folks just yet. Maybe we need to reflect for a minute on what Jesus has been up to before he tells this strange story to look for a clue about how he might judge them.

Jesus has been forgiving people's sins. He has been healing anyone who asked and even some who didn't. He has been welcoming tax collectors and prostitutes and all kinds of other reprobates. He has been pouring out God's gifts with abandon. And for doing these good things, the good guys of Jesus' day condemn him. He forgives without demanding appropriate penance or sacrifice. He heals people on the Sabbath, when no one is supposed to be working. He hangs out with the wrong kind of people without demanding that they change their ways. He marks down the fee for divine forgiveness so much that it is affordable to everybody. No wonder he infuriated the good people. He totally mismanages his job as a rabbi because he doesn't stop to evaluate whether forgiveness is really warranted or whether the law has been satisfied. We might say he was going rogue. You know what that means, don't you? Going rogue means acting on one's own, going against expectation, pursuing one's own interests. I hate to say it, but doesn't that sound a bit like the manager?

Consider this. The unjust manager, acting in his own interest, reaches out to poor people and reduces their debts. He forgives them and in so doing he reverses the existing order of things. He uses the rich man's wealth to bring relief to folks on the bottom. In the words of Mary's Magnificat, he manages in his small way to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly. He helps to fill the hungry and send the rich away with less.ⁱⁱⁱ And he does all this in a sneaky and surprising way. He accomplishes some good for his neighbors by not being respectable.

Respectability you see, is interested in winning, with earning a just reward, with following the rules. Jesus, on the other hand, became sin for us sinners, weak for us weaklings, lost for us

losers and dead for us who are dying. Jesus lures us into God’s realm by joining with us, making friends with us sinners and offering to clear the books of our debts to God. Jesus wants us to discover that God is not keeping a tally of our misdeeds, not examining our theology to make sure we are orthodox, not acting like some heavenly Santa checking his list of who is naughty or nice. What God is actually interested in is our loving him and caring about our neighbors.

Imagine what would happen if the bank called and told you that they were cutting 20% of your monthly mortgage payment or 50% off your car payment or 100% of your college loan. You might be thrilled, stunned even by the benevolence, but probably very happy. Or would you think, this is all well and good, but I shouldn’t have paid any of that college loan last year. I should have just waited to have it forgiven. Or maybe you don’t have a mortgage or a car loan or student debt. Then you might think, what a fool I was to diligently pay everything off. It’s just not fair.

And here is where we come to crux of the Jesus story. It isn’t fair. Those tenants didn’t deserve to have their rent cut and all those people whom Jesus healed or forgave or welcomed, hadn’t earned the gifts he gave them. And, as for us, we don’t deserve healing or forgiveness or welcome either. None of us—not then and not now—have earned that amazing love. That rogue Jesus makes up his own rules, or rather he functions under God’s rules, which are not based on being respectable or fair or deserving. The only rule is the rule of love.

That is good news for us, and also a challenge. If we are followers of Jesus, if we have confessed that he is our Lord, rather than the respectable, rule-makers of society, then we should be out there scheming for surprising, creative ways to demonstrate that love. He needs for us to be as driven and shrewd, to hustle and calculate the angles and maneuver as much for the gospel as the wheeler dealers out there are scheming for themselves. He invites us to join him in turning things upside down—forgiving with abandon, overturning hierarchies, using our resources for God’s purposes, upsetting the status quo, working for justice, loving our neighbors in new and deeper ways. So, maybe, some day, Jesus may say of us that we too acted shrewdly and we are welcome into God’s new creation.

ⁱ Timothy Cahill, “Business Training for Seminarians: Andover Newton at YDS Partners with SOM,” *Yale Today*, https://divinity.yale.edu/news/business-training-seminarians-andover-newton-yds-partners-som?utm_source=YaleToday&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=YT_Yale%20Today%20Alum%20no%20Parents_9-1-2022

ⁱⁱ Richard Lischer, *Interpretation: Reading the Parables*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p.100.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 1:52-53.