

I was helping a family friend move into a new apartment over the weekend. She was moving as a result of a long and complex divorce and child custody battle. Her new apartment is actually part of one of those big old houses in Canandaigua that have been chopped up into multi-family housing. My jaw dropped when I learned how much her monthly rent was. I just couldn't believe it was costing that much. I asked why she was willing to pay so much and she replied that she looked around at other similar housing and all of them were priced about the same. She didn't have much of a choice. Court rulings meant she had to live in the school district of Canandaigua.

One street over from me a similar house is for sale that is broken into rental units. When I consider the asking price for the house and rental income similar to what my friend is paying it looks like an amazing investment opportunity. You could borrow the full amount and make enough from rent to pay a mortgage, pay for upkeep and still have several hundred to spare every month. My friend tells me her landlord began buying

houses in Rochester and Canandaigua 15 years ago. He now owns over 100 houses and is buying ever more.

I suggested to my friend that she buy the house near me, but she can't. Because of unpaid legal fees and other financial arrangements with her divorce she cannot own anything until other financial obligations are met. Anything she buys would be subject to seizure. And so she is forced to rent.

Part of me looks at the whole situation from the standpoint of economics. Anyone in business wants to maximize profits. If a rental market will support high rents then charge them. You're foolish not to make money where money can be made.

Another part of me is appalled at the idea. How can anyone take advantage of the misfortune of others to make money; especially someone close? It might be perfectly legal, but is it ethical? Is it a moral thing to do? I don't want to get rich from someone else's misfortune. I don't want my prosperity to come by exploiting others.

Thoughts like that bring us to our gospel reading for today. We have another parable from Jesus, and like the parables we read last week - the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin - this one left its original hearers scratching their heads in confusion.

The single issue Jesus preached the most about was wealth, and he almost always preaches against it and against rich people. Wealth is bad. Wealth corrupts. Wealth is a false idol. Wealth draws people away from God. Jesus teaches to sell your possessions and give the money to the poor.

But in this parable Jesus has the master commend the dishonest manager for his legal but highly unethical conduct! We learn right from the beginning of the parable that the manager is a scoundrel. He's been mismanaging his master's property - assumedly living pretty high on the hog. His master demands to see the books, and in his last few hours before it all goes down he adds to all his corruption by cutting some very dirty deals with those who owe his master money. He reduces their debts.

These debt reductions aren't minor. They're huge! In today's money we're not talking a few hundred or a few thousand dollars. We're talking tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars, in debt forgiveness. This isn't the realm of private investing. These amounts are on the scale of big corporate financing.

Jesus tells us how this corrupt man's mind works. He's squandered his master's property on himself in the first place. He gets caught but before he is fired he reduces these debts, which as his master's agent he is legally allowed to do. He calculates that by doing so he's buying friends with what is already his master's money but they will repay the favor to him. Very clever. How corrupting wealth and power can be!

So we're ready for Jesus to tear into the guy for his greed and corruption. But the parable changes course. The manager gets commended for his ongoing corruption and scheming. You may have heard this parable many times so this twist is no surprise. But you can be sure the original hearers were taken off guard.

Jesus tells his hearers to be more shrewd. He tells them to make friends for themselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they will be welcomed into heaven. This is just not the kind of teaching we're used to from Jesus. What does it all mean?

Like all parables it means several things. First, indeed be creating and even cunning in your work for God's kingdom. Sometimes Christians fail to be faithful because they're afraid to get their hands dirty. They pursue faith with a lily white clean righteousness. They're aloof and superior to others. But we have to remember that God isn't afraid to get His hands dirty. Jesus ate with sinners and lowlifes in addition to the pious people. God isn't even afraid to play dirty too. The crucifixion was actually a highly cunning move on God's part. It twisted sin and evil in upon itself.

Jesus also literally wants us to be cunning with money; not exploiting people's misfortune but using wealth to buy friends in the same way wealth can be used to leverage business deals. Forgive debts that are unfair and crippling. Make people appreciate you. Use money, not as a lever for more money, but

as a tool to accomplish God's will. There are very loving and constructive ways to use money.

Everyone knows, or should know by now, that simply giving money away doesn't solve anything for needy people. But using it as an incentive, as a tool for empowerment, does amazing things. Our missionary Arden Strasser likes to use microcredit programs to build local economies. They aren't grants. No one is being shamed as being a needy person. No, people are being empowered to build their lives and build their communities.

Returning to the example of charging high rents and making money from other people's misfortune, what if a landlord looked at the cost of buying and maintaining a house, set the rent to cover those costs and give a reasonable return for the time and headaches involved in being a landlord, and being content with that? It would be providing good housing to people who need it, giving them a dignified place to call home at a fair cost for what they are getting. That's investing wealth for good, not leveraging it for ever more selfish gain. That is the way Jesus would have us apply the resources of this world that we call our own.

Never one to beat around the bush, Jesus lays it on the line. You can't serve both God and money. You're going to depend upon one or the other. You can't look to both to give you happiness and status and safety. They just don't mix.

Serve God so that what you are investing in is not dependent upon the economic forces of this world but the enduring salvation of God's grace which never disappoints. Amen