

Currency of An Unrighteous Age

I watched the second Godfather movie this past week. If you haven't seen it, the movie tells two stories simultaneously. While watching the demise of the mafia don Michael Corleone in the mid-1950s, viewers see intertwined flashbacks from fifty years earlier, when Michael's father, the original Godfather Vito Corleone, rose from a penniless Italian immigrant to become a powerful, respected, and feared figure.

There's a key moment when young Vito's life turned the corner from poverty to ill-gotten riches. Vito and two friends were beginning to do well for themselves stealing things like designer dresses—so well, in fact, that they attract the attention of the local mafia boss, Don Fanucci. Don Fanucci approaches Vito and says, "I hear you and your friends were recently involved in some shenanigans which netted you \$600 each." The don then demands some protection money, telling Vito that he needs to "wet his beak" to the tune of \$200 from each of the three men. The subtext of this "request" was clear: "Pay up or else!"

Upon hearing of this demand, Vito's friends immediately decide to pay up. But Vito has a different idea. He tells his two friends to pay him \$50 each. Vito, in turn, will give the don this money plus his own \$50, and will do it in such a way that Fanucci will accept less than he demanded. When his friends ask Vito how he's going to pull this off, Vito tells them, "Never mind that, but just remember I did you a favor once."

Vito then tells his friends that they are to go to Fanucci the next day, tell him that they respect him and that through Vito they will pay the don whatever he wants. The next day both men do as instructed. Later Vito meets privately with Fanucci but pays him only the \$100 he collected from his two friends. When the don demands to know where the rest of the money is, Vito smirks and says he needs some time, seeing as he was rather short of money at the moment.

Don Fanucci then surmises that Vito must have shaken down his two friends, that, based on what the two other men had told Fanucci earlier, Vito must have received \$200 from each friend but pocketed it, even as he now boldly winks at the don. Surprisingly, Fanucci smiles in approval, openly admiring Vito's courage. "You've done well for yourself," he says. He accepts the \$100, offers to let Vito work for him, and even adds that if he can do anything for Vito, to let him know! Fanucci, we gather, respects Vito as a fellow wheeler-and-dealer, a fellow sneak and cheat who knew how to work other people to his own advantage.

That's what goes for honor among thieves, I guess. That's life in the mob—you get respect for being a scoundrel. Where else would you be commended for being a dishonest cheat? Well, with Jesus, apparently!

That's what we gather from the passage we just read from Luke's Gospel. Here, Jesus tells the story of a lazy, dishonest manager who gets called on the carpet by his boss for wasting the company's money. He's told he has till tomorrow morning to get the books in order to give a full account of his management. Realizing he's in hot water, the manager gets an idea. He goes to some of his boss's clients and offers to mark down what they owe. When they ask why, the manager winks at them and says, "Don't ask, but just remember I did you a favor once." In this way the man puts into his debt people who might lend him money, give him a new job, maybe even find him a place to stay when he's thrown out on his ear. However, when the boss finds out what he's done, the boss amazingly doesn't throw him jail or even out on the street. Instead, he commends the manager for his shrewdness: "Well done, guileful and faithless servant. Enter into your master's joy." Wait, what?

If that's not strange enough, Jesus then tells us we should be more like this crook, for he knows what it takes to get things done. Again, what?

It's not clear what "lesson" we're supposed to draw here. What is it about this guy that we are supposed to "go and do likewise"? What on earth does Jesus think that we, "children of the light," can learn from this scoundrel?

There's some indication that Luke had trouble making sense of it too. For the verses that follow look like they were added by some scribe trying to make sense of Jesus' story, even though they aren't really connected to the parable. "Whoever is not faithful in small things won't be faithful in big things." True, but that's not the point here... "If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?" Closer, but the parable actually teaches the opposite. "You cannot serve two masters, God and wealth." Ok, also true, but what does this have to do with the manager who cheats his boss out of what he is due?

Naturally, learned scholars and preachers had to get involved, to offer their explanations. Through many contortions, they attempt to make this parable make sense, in the usual ways we make sense. They explain that perhaps the parable got jumbled over the years, and the meaning was lost in translation. Maybe this parable is hyperbole, some sort of strange overstatement that Jesus uses to get our attention. Maybe the manager wasn't *actually* stealing from his boss. What he was doing was just cutting down the interest owed to his boss to the legal limits, so what he did was ultimately not so wrong. Perhaps the unscrupulous manager only cut out his own commission, so what he did was not so dishonest after all. And so on.

I have to tell you I don't find any of these "explanations" particularly convincing. Nothing in the parable itself supports these interpretations. I'm thinking the story is simpler than all that. What the dishonest manager and Vito Corleone both have in common, besides a "flexible" sense of morality, is the ability to think ahead, to foresee the future and its possibilities and to act today to protect themselves from the impending catastrophe. They make plans, work the angles, and look to leverage their connections, their positions, their resources, to ensure that later they will be land on their feet.

And that *appears* to be what Jesus means when he says that Christians should look at swindlers like the shrewd manager and learn how to use our "wealth" to smooth our way, to secure our

place in the future. We all face crises, times of judgment, in this life or in the life to come, and when that happens, Jesus says, we should be like this scoundrel and use what we've got to secure our future, not just our future on earth but our future in heaven. Because we never know what is going to happen, we never know when we will be called up.

And yet, I don't know that the imminence of death and judgment is really what is at the heart of this parable. The threat of termination is not the main point but is part of the set-up, the reason for the urgency of the manager's action. Jesus doesn't commend the manager for simply recognizing the impending danger, but rather what he does about it—he creatively uses the means at his disposal to secure a better future. In particular, the manager acts to leverage his position and the trust given to him to secure future favors from his master's clients.

And so, the moral then could be that we should do good for others in the hope that they'll speak well about us to God when we die. This reminds me of Jesus' "lessons in table etiquette" from a few weeks ago, where he tells his followers that they will be blessed, if they "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" to their dinner parties, because "they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Now, I don't know about you, but I cringe at that idea. By this interpretation, Jesus is suggesting we can "buy" our way into heaven, that salvation is somehow transactional: You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. I'll do you a solid now, and you can get me back later. But that is not at all consistent with what Jesus says elsewhere, not consistent with the nature of grace. So that can't be the point of this story. Arrgh! This is not an easy story to figure out, is it?

Ok, so, what if it's not about "indebtedness" but about "investment"? The manager has at his disposal a good deal of wealth, his boss's wealth, and, when he's about to be fired, he decides to invest it to secure his own future. Only, his is a very different "investment strategy" than we are used to. Instead of using money to make more money, in the stock market or land speculation or capital purchases, the manager uses it to make friends.

This suggests a very different approach to money than we are used to. Money, you know, is never just money. It's about what money represents. Money means different things to different people. Money can mean future security or comfort in the present. It can mean freedom to do what you want, or it can mean power that you can wield over others. For some, it's just a handy way to keep score in their competition with their peers. Today's parable suggests an approach to money that sees it as more than a means to power or security or freedom, but as a way of building relationships and thereby involving ourselves in establishing God's Kingdom on earth. The shrewd manager, like others in the present age, knows how to use his wits, to strategize and exploit resources to achieve his aims, Jesus acknowledges, and so should we *in service to the Gospel*.

The idea we get here is that we are like venture capitalists: we've got resources that belong to someone else (God), and we're charged with using those resources wisely but also cunningly, investing them in ways we think will grow and bear a return for our Client (God). Or better, we are to be entrepreneurs—to strategize, take risks, manipulate our assets and networks to our

advantage, and do whatever we need to do to see that the vision, God's vision, becomes a reality. This is what it means to be a good, shrewd steward.

Then again, maybe *that's* not the point, either. Maybe there is no "point" to this story after all. Indeed, maybe it's a kind of Jewish "koan." A koan is a puzzling, paradoxical riddle common to Zen Buddhism. Like, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or "If a tree falls in the forest but there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?" The thing about koans is, they're not meant to be "solved" but to be meditated on.

Maybe that's what Jesus has in mind here when he challenges us to "Make friends with the currency of this unrighteousness age." The point isn't to *teach* us something, but to get us thinking, asking questions, and in so doing, to learn to "live the question," not looking for an answer that can be written down, and then forgotten when you close the book, but "giving form" to an answer in the way we live, making our lives the answer to the question.

Too often we come to church hoping to get clear, straightforward answers to life's big questions. But what Jesus offers is not answers but adventure, an invitation to follow him, to learn from him, and in the process come to not just know the answers but live them out. To be sure, there *are* answers to those big questions, but more often than not, the answers are not ones that can be just given to us. They come through a relationship with God, through the experience of following Him.

Today's Gospel reading is perplexing and confusing, one of the most perplexing and confusing passages in the whole Bible. We can take it any number of ways, can find in it any number of valuable lessons. But more than any lesson, it is an invitation to adventure, to a life of finding out what it means to use "unrighteous" wealth righteously, for God's purposes. God has given us so much, everything really, and he challenges us to use what we have not just for ourselves, but for a greater cause, for the Kingdom. We don't have to know what that means up front, but it does mean being committed to finding it out for ourselves. That's the challenge—and the thrill—of following Jesus. Thanks be to God!