

Sometimes we see “it” coming; sometimes we don’t; but when “it” arrives, we can’t miss “it.”

“It” found me on the Wednesday of Holy Week 1993. I was sitting in the bi-monthly interdisciplinary group meeting of Hospice of Crawford County just as I’d sat in those meetings with the nurses, our social worker, medical director, and executive director for the previous 5 years. I sat down expecting business as usual; when I was finally able to get up out of my seat, everything had changed, the wind was definitely knocked out of my sails, and my head was spinning as I tried to figure out what I was going to do.

I wasn’t fired; my hours had been cut; cut from a number that paid the bills to a number that didn’t. I was married with 3 young children, and I’d just been given a 30% pay cut.

I went home. I got busy. My head stopped spinning, and I became very, very focused; by the end of that weekend, my pastoral information form (glorified resume) was done and online; I’d contacted a number of churches with vacancies, including a certain Pennside Presbyterian Church; I was all job search all the time.

I was very much in the shoes of that dishonest manager who got this surprise: *Luke 16:2–3 (NRSV) ² [The Master] summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.*

Jesus’ parable of the dishonest manager has been called the most difficult parable to interpret by some of the greatest tenured professors of the 20th century; professors like Rudolf Bultmann and Joachim Jeremias, but I wonder if their secure positions insulated them from this parable? I wonder if our natural anxiety about money as a means of security is so great that we cannot hear what Jesus is saying to us today. I wonder if we’re over-thinking this teaching of Jesus. *Luke 16:13 (NRSV) No slave can serve two 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.”*

Is this really that hard for us to understand, or is the challenge found not in understanding this teaching but implementing it? What will we do? Little things mean a lot.

❶ Thinking Outside of the Box

Management gurus in the 1970's and 80's challenged us to solve the 9 dots puzzle; three rows of three dots arranged in the shape of a square; to solve the puzzle we had to connect the dots with 4 lines or less that we drew without ever lifting our pencil and without tracing the same line more than once. Many frustrating moments later, many of us would look up and say it was impossible; at which point, the smug presenter would demonstrate the solution; the key was to draw our line beyond the box so that we had the necessary angle to connect the dots.

That line was a metaphor which has become a cliché for thinking creatively and envisioning possibilities that go beyond our known limitations – “thinking outside the box.”

The dishonest manager was a master of thinking outside of the box. He had to be; necessity was the mother of his invention. He'd been fired but he still had a window of opportunity. Ordinarily, then as now, the firing would be abrupt and unexpected. “You're fired. Give me your books, and get out, now.” The fall from grace would be swift and complete; the manager would leave the Master with his head spinning, his stomach in knots, his career over.

This is paralleled in our time by the practice of having a fired or downsized, right-sized, pick your euphemism, employee pack their belongings in a box and be escorted from the building by security. It puts a whole new spin on the phrase “out of the box.”

Given what the dishonest manager did with his window of opportunity, which is to cost his master significant money, we can understand why the standard procedure is what it is; a recently fired employee has every incentive to get back at their employer and to get whatever they can get for themselves. Loyalty is out the window; for the employee, it's all about survival. What can he do today that will assure him a tomorrow?

That intense focus is what this parable is all about; that determination to make tomorrow a reality today is what Jesus is teaching us discipleship is all about. When our lives are on the line, we have no problem rising to that challenge. How much more

then should we rise to the challenge when eternal life is ours for the taking (and giving)? The Master has given us a task; that task is at hand!

What will we do?

② Little Things Mean a Lot

The challenge of the Christian life; the task that is ours as individual Christians and collectively ours as Pennside Presbyterian Church, Lehigh Presbytery, the Synod of the Trinity, Presbyterian Church USA, the Church with a capitol “C” is summed up by the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

We are sent in the power of the Holy Spirit to change the world. When we see what is wrong, it’s up to us to make it right. When we see what is needed, it’s up to us to get it done.

Luke 16:9–10 (NRSV) And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.

The disquiet we feel when we read this strange parable and hear Jesus praising a crook and telling us to be just as clever as he was demonstrates the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. The values of the kingdom turn the values of this world upside down. In the kingdom of God, bigger isn’t better; it just slows us down. In the kingdom, more isn’t merrier; it just adds to our load of cares. In the kingdom, freedom isn’t free; freedom is found in serving Jesus by serving “the least of these.”

Opportunities abound for us to make a difference for Jesus’ sake; opportunities abound, but are we opportunistic enough to recognize them and do we have the holy boldness necessary to not simply see the opportunity but to seize it and make the most of it?

Pennside may have such an opportunity. Another Hispanic congregation has come to us; Temple Biblico would like to worship here. If all goes well, they will begin next week. We met by “accident.” I just happened to stop by the church yesterday afternoon to pick up something I’d forgotten. They just happened to stop by then. Here’s the

opportunity: One of their members mentioned that there are 58,000 Hispanics in Reading. 58,000!

Their presence isn't always welcome. I've read and heard comments (and I suspect you have too) that speak in generalities that border on racism (and sometimes cross that border).

Dealing with difference is a challenge, and Hispanics often look different, speak a different language, and dwell in a different culture.

The kingdom of this world responds to this difference out of fear. The kingdom of God responds out of faith. An Anglo church welcoming and respecting an Hispanic church is a sign of the kingdom of God in Mount Penn! Can we rise to this challenge? Can we seize this opportunity?

Little things mean a lot. We know when we're welcome. We know when we're not: a word here, a tone there, silence in our presence but plenty of conversation that stops when we enter a room. We know when we're not welcome, but a smile, a handshake as we look a person in the eye; these little things mean a lot too.

The kingdom of God comes through little things like that; whether it is welcoming a new congregation into our building, a new neighbor into our community, or an old friend who's going through a tough time. These little things mean a lot.

God is at work in this world. God is making all things new. As much as we would like that to be an orderly, controlled, predictable, safe process, God is too great and too good to be confined by our limits! We have our mission: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We believe “we are sent to serve.” What will we do? Little thing mean a lot!