A story without a hero

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The Gospels show Jesus as prophet, teacher, and miracle worker. But most intriguingly, they depict him as a storyteller--one who could not only draw a crowd but keep it riveted.

By etymology, a parable is literally "a throwing beside," a composite of the Greek para- ("alongside") and bole ("a throwing, casting, a beam, a ray"). These short-short narratives are often underestimated as simple, one-point "messages" designed to teach some truth. In Jesus' version of the form, however, they are much trickier (as are those of Kierkegaard and Kafka long after him). The story he throws is often a curveball--more an enigma than an illustration, a problem to be puzzled over rather than a moral to be learned. His parables often leave the listener with interpretive work to be done, even if occasionally the Gospel writers will have Jesus offer an interpretation that instead brings closure.

Most exciting of the lot are the unadorned, unexplained parables that offer a glimpse of God's Kingdom--one-liners that, like Zen koans, seem meant deliberately to puzzle or confuse. How, precisely, is God's reign "like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field"? (Matt. 13:44) Isn't this at best shady business?

Others are also brief but more fleshed out, stories that often work against received wisdom, propriety, and even justice. Latecomers to the vineyard receive the same wages as those who have worked in the sun for an entire day; unjust judges and wily

stewards become exemplars (but of what?). Such stories seem determined both to mystify and to disturb the peace.

A case in point is the parable in this week's Gospel reading about the rich man who discovers that his wealth is being mismanaged by a "squandering" manager. When the steward is fired, he quickly considers his options. He's not going to soil his hands or ruin his image by going around begging. Instead, he'll make deals with his boss's debtors in order to ingratiate himself with them: "people will welcome me into their homes." Still having access to his boss's funds, he cuts one debt by a third, another by half.

Astonishingly, the rich man commends the crook for "act[ing] shrewdly." Why? Does he simply admire the man's moxie?

One hopes in vain for Jesus to end with an explanation of what he means by this parable. Instead he offers puzzling suggestions that the "children of light" have much to learn from the shrewdness of the "children of this age"; that dishonesty in small matters (like "dishonest wealth") reflects badly on one's ability to handle the riches of the kingdom; that one cannot both "serve God and wealth," even though this is precisely what everyone ends up doing.

To quote the Apostle Paul, "What then shall we say to this?" Doing my best with this passage I am left with a disarming story about people who have only one thing in common: a preoccupation with the "wealth" we used to call "Mammon." The rich man has so much of it that he can afford to admire a petty crook's shrewdness at his own expense. The wily manager turns everything to his advantage, going from potential ruin to making friends and influencing people. And the rich man's debtors profit from the manager's mismanagement of the boss's resources. No one comes off looking very good.

The world of the parable is much like the world in which we live. Of such is the kingdom of earth, governed by the "children of this age," where dishonest wealth is more often than not the coin of the realm and "true riches" extraordinarily difficult to believe in let alone to find.

Maybe the point of this short story, then, doesn't have to be the clear takeaway I want; maybe its presentation of our malady serves Jesus' purpose. I'm haunted by what the rich man says at the beginning of the tale: "What is this I hear about you? Give me an account of your management." Maybe that's the question and the

command we need to hear.