

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
Dr. Jonathan Dent
What is Hidden Will be Revealed

February 27, 2011
8th Sunday after Epiphany

I had a friend in the '80s who taught Accounting at a major Canadian university. Ron felt he had a dilemma in his life because he also was a strong believer in Jesus Christ and wanted his faith to permeate all of his work. From his point of view, the climate at the time in his particular department at the university was one of teaching students that an Accountant could make the books look like anything the management wanted them to look like. It was all simply a matter of perspective and had little to do with reality, so techniques were taught in line with this principle of presenting figures and bottom lines as a kind of spin, rather than a transparent look at the reality of the business.

Ron, on the other, was painfully aware that a Christian believes there will be a time of accounting when the books are opened and our lives are put on God's screen and we will see them as they truly have been, not spun, not as we might have liked them to be, but as they truly are. Thus accounting should be in line with this view. It is about the highs and lows, positive and negative, successes and failures, the whole gamut of what we go through. He tried hard to present accounting in line with his Christian world view. I'm not sure how successful he was in his career. I know I have thought about him many times over the years, particularly during those turbulent years of Enron, and Anderson Accounting. These were the firms that apparently had no problem in spinning the reality of a major company into something that in the end was simply called "fraud" by the financial community, the government, and law enforcement agencies.

The apostle Paul was trying hard to help the Corinthian church. He was clearly defending his leadership and his leadership team. A big part of the struggle in the church was not so much who was the main leader, as much as what does leadership look like and how can you present your own position in a balanced way without looking like an arrogant fool. Of course, Paul asked the Lord, and the Lord directed him to put the cross in the center of his message. The message of who Jesus was full of superlative opposites: the almighty king became the servant of us all, laid down all his divine powers, lived a fully human life among us, was received as the king by some, but others chose to have him tortured to death. In the life he lived, Jesus became

both high priest and sacrifice. He was the lion of Judah and the lamb of God. He was the son of man and the son of God. He was and is the way, truth and life that leads us to God and gives us the power to live a changed life by loving us and showing us the truth.

Paul knew that the power he had in his life when he was writing the Corinthians was a different kind of power than he had when he was going house to house in Jerusalem putting Christians in jail and participating in others being executed for their faith. That power was taken away when he was blinded on the road to Damascus even though he wanted to do to the believers there what he had done in Jerusalem. So a new life was given to him when his sight was restored.

This new power was one of transparent honesty in relationship to the self giving God who had become a servant of humanity. So Paul now was telling the Corinthians that his main identity among them was not as a powerful, eloquent leader, but rather as a servant. He uses two Greek words in chapter four for servant that we probably don't have the background that the people of the day immediately understood. The first word (*hyperetas*) for servant was the word specifically used for those slaves rowing in the lower decks of a trireme. Now a trireme was a Hellenistic warship, a galley that was propelled by three rows of oars on either side of the ship, those oars usually manned by slaves. If you have seen the 1959 movie Ben Hur, with Charlton Heston as the main character who winds up in one of these galleys rowing as a slave, you have some idea of the lifestyle, even though it is Hollywood.

Paul was saying that is the kind of leadership he has. He is a servant, one of many, who is helping the ship move forward in the direction it is supposed to go. The other word (*oikonomos*) which is translated "steward" is also a picture of a slave. This one is a household servant; an educated slave who keeps the books for a reasonably wealthy home. In this image, the person has a place of authority and influence but still is the property of the head of the house. There is a sense in this image of a servant or steward that the person's life is on the line for the accuracy of accounting and book keeping he does.

In both these images, Paul makes the case for his leadership, that he is most certainly serving the Corinthian church as slaves serve their master. But while he is clearly saying he serves them, he also says that they are not his

master. I remember a pastor telling me a story about another pastor during a time of conflict, saying to the congregation, "I am your servant, but you are not my master." Paul is saying this to the Corinthians. He wants them to know that he loves them and will do everything he can for them, but at the same time wants them to know that the deeper love is for God, for Jesus. In fact, all of us together serve the Lord, serve Jesus, if we truly understand and agree with our faith.

Then once we agree together that we are all servants of this one purpose and cause of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ that relationship with God is available through his work on the cross and his resurrection. Once we understand this and agree with this, then really our task is to simply and honestly put forward this good news in our daily lives.

We will all be judged by God some day on how we have lived our lives. But first it is about the choice to be in good relationship with Jesus.

How are we doing in this area of our lives? What if we were to die today, God forbid? Would God, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart, be pleased with our commitment to Him? Or are there more doubts and confusion that would come to light? It is important to first of all know where we stand with the master, only then can we talk about our works and our accomplishments. Honesty and transparency are qualities not only needed in Accounting but certainly in our personal and spiritual lives.

And once we have reflected personally on our own relationship to God, then we ask what our role is in his family, in his church and how well we have done to build up the church and advance the kingdom, of which we pray every week, "Thy kingdom come."

Once a year we have a chance to look at our congregation, our ministry, our roles in this church. We have a chance to ask questions and to transparently present who we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it.

I do hope you can stay for this time. It is important for you to know why you are here, what you can do, and why it is important for you to do it. We are all rowing together in this ship called St. David's.

We had visitors from Hong Kong this week and one of them asked me what the focus of our congregational ministry was. I was unable to give him a clear answer. I spoke about some of our activities, our concern and love for our young families, our connection to the university and our desire for everyone to know the Lord. But perhaps you would like to give input into what our mission is here. We are asking the elders to ask each of you a series of questions that will help us know why you choose to see yourself as connected here. Meanwhile we will look through all that we have done in the last year and ask ourselves, "Is this what we are to be doing for many years to come? Or is this something that may finish soon?"

We want you to be a part of the conversation. We desire your prayers for the direction and stewardship of this congregation. We need you, everyone of you for making this place the most it can be.

We trust the Lord for our future. We trust God for our present. We thank God for our past.

Let us pray.