

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 21, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Amos 8:4-7; 2nd Reading: 1 Timothy 2:1-7
Scripture for the Message: Luke 16:1-13 “Shrewdness”

I am telling the truth when I say I am disturbed by this passage from Luke. Why did Jesus tell this parable to his disciples – why did Luke record it in his Gospel? One popular notion is that most of Jesus’ parables were meant to provoke, challenge, and inspire – that is why we remember them. The stories he told prompted the hearer and reader to draw their own conclusions regarding the lesson, yet they also force the hearer and reader to realize that their answers may be leaps of faith or they may be traps. Jesus asked his followers, and us for that matter, to love God with everything we have and that includes our brains – maybe that is why his parables challenge us. In the reading, re-reading, and sharing of these parable stories we can assess the conclusions others draw and then reassess our own. That is how we learn and grow in faith. This parable, however, leaves me with questions.

In the many bible translations, there are several different titles given to this parable, in the NIV translation [the bibles we read from] it is given the title of “The Parable of the Shrewd Manager.” The NRSV translation gives the title of “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager.” Another translation, the NAB, used primarily by the Roman Catholic church labels this parable, “The Wily Manager.” This guy has been called shrewd, cunning, dishonest, and devious, yet his “boss” commended him for his actions. That alone can lead to our confusion on the lesson in this parable. We read Jesus’ words and tell ourselves that this manager received praise for the shrewd handling of the predicament he was in – not for being dishonest or devious. Yet, it was the dishonesty and the deviousness that opens the opportunity for shrewdness – was he the original Robin Hood, robbing the rich master and giving to the poor debtors?

People tend to think that because the Pastor went to Seminary the Pastor knows what everything in our scriptures mean. I can honestly tell you that even St. Augustine of Hippo had difficulties with this passage. I studied various scholars and read two or three different interpretations on this passage and I have come to some conclusions that give an indication of the lesson in it for us today, maybe some indication of what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples, the ones to whom this parable was originally told. I think for understanding we need to look at some of the surrounding passages in Luke’s gospel, scripture that we have read over the past month. And then certainly we should apply some critical thinking and use

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our brains to struggle with this passage – we probably should not just blindly accept what we just read at face value and skip over the several possible meanings.

We should remember that Luke's Gospel has Jesus bringing good news to the poor and marginalized people of his time. Luke's narrative draws a continuous line from the Scriptures of Israel (our Old Testament) to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and from Jesus into the community of Christian believers. Luke writes about what Jesus teaches his disciples, forming them into the apostles who would be the future of the church. Our scripture reading today, joins Jesus and his followers on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus shares parables along the way. Parables that he crafted to teach and inform his listeners. Jesus describes for them the kingdom of heaven, he talks to them about humility and taking the lowest place at the banquet table. Jesus recounts for them the true cost of discipleship, how his followers must be willing to give up everything to be his disciple. He tells the parable of the "prodigal son," and he teaches them about the rejoicing that occurs in God's kingdom when even one lost sinner repents.

This teaching seems to draw the ire of the Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders who felt they had all the knowledge needed to gain God's favor. They criticize Jesus for welcoming sinners; they call him blasphemer for "working" on the sabbath and they sneer at his teachings. By this time in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, those who were against him and his teachings were carefully watching him for any reason to persecute him.

So now we have a bit of the background for what we just read. "Luke's portrayal of Jesus' life depicts a person who rejoices in life and accepts the goodness of God's creation, including some of the things that only money can buy."¹ Jesus knew people of wealth and spent time with them. Jesus' own relatives were people with means; he ate at the homes of wealthy people and allowed his friends to use their wealth to help him and his followers financially. Jesus did not condemn the wealthy, only their attitudes toward their possessions.

The first thing to remember is that Jesus is now talking only to his disciples not to the Pharisees and those who wanted to persecute him, although they probably overheard him. In this case, I do not think Jesus is teaching his disciples the evils of money neither do I think he encourages dishonesty, although it may

¹ Walter E. Pilgrim. *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke Acts*. Augsburg. 1981. Print. 124

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appear that way on the surface. Maybe he is giving them instructions about using wealth and power to serve God's purposes.

So, what about this is dishonest? Some scholars look at this parable and excuse the manager as only cancelling out what he would have taken as a commission for collecting the debt. If that is the case, then he wasn't dishonest at all – but why would his "boss" commend him for that or even become aware of that? We don't know for sure whether Jesus is commending this fellow for being shrewd or if he is ending the parable with the rich master's comments on the managers behavior. Maybe Jesus' comments begin with the statement "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." But what does that even mean!

I wonder if there is some hidden meaning in what Jesus tells his disciples this "shrewd" manager did to secure his future. When the manager called his "master's debtors" in and reduced their debt – he was doing what Jesus asks us to do – FORGIVE. This manager forgave what he probably had no right or obligation to forgive – was that dishonesty or was that loving others? His forgiveness and shrewdness not only made him look good, but it also made his "boss" look generous and forgiving – a win-win situation. Maybe that is what Jesus wanted to teach the disciples, forgive even when you have no obligation to forgive – forgive and you will be forgiven.

Certainly, forgiveness is part of the lesson. Though in my mind there is more to it. Jesus is teaching his disciples knowing that it would not be long before they would be on their own; knowing that the ones persecuting him would also persecute them. When Jesus makes the statements we read in verses eight and nine, "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." My thoughts go to how we manage what God entrusts to us. Is Jesus giving advice about buying friends and bribing officials? If we think that maybe we need to take a closer look at the parable and its context.

Maybe Jesus is making an appeal to adopt a sense of urgency knowing that the disciples did not have all the time in the world – use what you have now to secure your salvation for the future. Jesus knew his days were numbered, just as the disciples' days were numbered, just as our days are numbered – act now. The "shrewd" manager also knew his days as manager were numbered, so he took decisive action and made a wise decision in the time of crisis. What would be the

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outcome if the followers of Christ, who seek God's reign, would exhibit the same cunning intelligence as that manager? What if we acknowledge that all things come as blessings from a benevolent God and use what God gives us in service of love? What if we use our "wealth" to secure our places in the eternal kingdom? What if we put our possessions to work for the service of humanity – according to God's will?

But wait because there is more to Jesus' lesson – I wonder if what he now tells his disciples is phrased the way it is because Jesus knows the Pharisees and the "lovers of money" are eavesdropping on his teaching. Jesus talks about trust and dishonesty. He talks about world wealth, true riches, and property. "No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve both God and money." That is it in a nutshell – Jesus is throwing down a gauntlet, pick one, choose either God or money it doesn't work both ways.

Where are your loyalties – are we loyal to what we can earn in this world, to our money, jobs, or status? Jesus does not preach that possessions are inherently evil, more to his point is the proper use of and attitude toward possessions. Hidden in this story we see a manager who in the end, rather than accumulating wealth for himself, invests in relationships. He does what he is able to do to ensure his future even though it means lessening a potential profit for himself.

So maybe that is the message and lesson for those of us who struggle with this parable today. We should be putting our possessions to work for the service of humanity, the church should be putting what God entrusts to us to work in service of humanity, in service of the community, in service of each other rather than seeking to gain a profit. "If a dishonest manager can ensure his future with shrewdness, how much more should we Christians behave shrewdly in advancing the cause of the kingdom?"² Jesus is telling his disciples to deal with the world shrewdly, to be cunning as snakes and gentle as doves – the same message applies to each of us and to the church. Do not be caught in the world's evil snares, deal shrewdly with this world to ensure your place in eternity.

We have all certainly at one time or another dealt with the struggle of serving two masters. We have all felt the pull of debt, of putting our jobs first so we can meet our financial obligations. Face it, money is essential these days and

² J. William Harkins. "Theological Perspective: Luke 16:1-13." *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke Vol. 2*. WJK. 2014. Print. 94

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seems to be at the top of the list of basic needs. We need money to survive – money in ever increasing amounts so it is difficult to not be focused on accumulating wealth. You or I might worry about our nest eggs or what is in our retirement accounts, the church might worry about the interest from our investment accounts and how that affects our future, but we should also remember that there are others, maybe even the people sitting next to you, who worry about feeding and housing their families in the present time.

Part of faithfully living in the kingdom of God and faithfully living according to God's will is how we treat others. The church and the people in it should never let what we have been given lessen our love and commitment to Jesus and our work in Jesus' name. This parable and much of the "harsh" words Jesus has for his disciples and for us – remind us that we manage our "wealth" at God's discretion and that we should consider our priorities and values when we consider how to use our wealth, talents, and skills for the service of others.