

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 21, 2025
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Frazier
Luke 16:1-13

A good chunk of what we know about Jesus comes not from detailed biographical sketches laid out by the gospel writers nor from long literary dialogs which were a common device for describing a great thinker's ideas or philosophy, but from parables. If you add up all of the parables that Jesus told, there are nearly forty. Parables are simple and relatable stories that convey profound spiritual or moral lessons. These little stories tell us a good deal about what Jesus wants us to know about God and the kingdom of God and how humans are to behave and interact in order to live as God intends.

There is likely no parable of Jesus's that has baffled Christians as thoroughly as the parable of the "shrewd" or "dishonest" manager. This one raises the oddest and thorniest of questions: why does the rich man commend his manager for dishonesty? Why does Jesus offer his followers such an unsavory character as a role model? In what sense are the "children of light" supposed to take a cue from the "shrewdness" of a self-interested scoundrel? Are we missing something, or does this story in fact contradict everything Jesus stands for in the rest of the Gospels?

There are a few parables where Jesus or the gospel writers gives some explanation at the end, but this isn't really one of them. In this one like many others, Jesus may make some brief comments, but he leaves the meaning of

the parable rather open to interpretation and reinterpretation. When we read a given parable we may come up with one meaning or lesson one day and something rather different the next day. The ultimate point of Jesus's parables may just be to enter into the story and keep wrestling with it, keep growing with it.

In the parable we have before us, Jesus describes a manager who is about to be fired for “squandering” his employer's property. Knowing that his time is short and his future prospects of employment limited, the manager summons his boss's debtors, reduces their debts, and thus secures their goodwill and loyalty. When his boss finds out what the manager has done, he doesn't get angry. He *commends* the manager for acting shrewdly to save his own skin.

We have to acknowledge a certain sense of reality in this story. Jesus describes a world we know only too well. A world in which dishonesty, corruption, self-interest, and ill-gotten wealth rule the day. A world in which selfish ambition often secures praise and prosperity, while honesty garners cynicism and contempt. A world in which the heavy burden of debt cripples people both financially and morally. A world in which unfairness, exploitation, and privilege are so systemic, we barely notice — much less protest. A world in which ethical living is neither straightforward nor easy.

Maybe the parable of the shrewd manager is simply a grim but truthful portrait of the world as it is — the real world in which we are called to be “children of light.” Maybe the story is an acknowledgment that the Christian calling is both

radically countercultural and painfully hard to practice. Maybe the story is Jesus coming in close to us and saying, “I know. It’s bad out there. I’m with you, I get it.”

The truth is, we as Christians live in a world that is profoundly interconnected — and profoundly compromised. Even the tiniest financial decisions we make — where to shop, how to invest our money, what to eat or wear in an age of corporate greed, child labor, climate change, and globalization — have far-reaching consequences. Jesus’s parable reminds us to hold this complicated reality close to our hearts and our consciences all the time. We must be awake to this reality while at the same time being faithful and following the way of love. To *not* do so is to succumb to the darkness.

When the manager realizes that he’s in trouble, he springs into action. He doesn’t wait around, he doesn’t despair — he gets himself out the door, all set with a plan. Perhaps it’s this sense of urgency, of single-mindedness, of creative possibility and cleverness that wins the manager such high praise from his employer. The manager harbors no illusions; he knows himself well. He knows he’s “not strong enough to dig,” and he knows he’s “too ashamed to beg,” so he focuses instead on redeeming what he can about the situation he finds himself in. If nothing else, there’s something no-nonsense, something steely and utterly practical about his choices.

Jesus seems to point to this when he comments, “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of

light.” I wonder if Jesus is telling us that, like the manager, we must engage the crises, issues, injustices, losses, and failures facing our generation, facing our Church, facing our world, here and now.

The shrewd manager knew he couldn’t just sit and wait and leave things as they were. He did his best to meet the challenges he faced head on. Perhaps Jesus is telling us we should do the same. Where in our individual and collective lives are we waiting around instead of hitting the streets, the pews, the hearts, the nations? Where and how might we be more shrewd, more clever, more creative, and more single-minded in our vocations as children of light and followers of Christ’s way of love?

If we take another perspective in reading this parable of the dishonest manager, it could be a parable about forgiveness. The story begins with the rich man accusing the manager of “squandering” his property. What if what this “squandering” is, taking a different perspective, actually generous living? What if the manager’s mismanagement is in reality the fruit of his compassion? How would the story read differently if we assumed that the manager spent years risking his job and his employer’s displeasure to ease the financial struggles of the workers he managed? True, his methods as described are dishonest; Jesus makes that clear. But what if *even in his imperfection*, the manager embodies grace and forgiveness? This interpretation would be consistent with his last and drastic move in the story: even on his way out, he lessens the debts of those who can’t pay off what they

owe. It may be a risky move, it may anger his boss, but he errs on the side of grace and forgiveness.

Jesus says at the end, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” If we choose to read the parable as a story of forgiveness, then even the rich boss's role in the story ends in grace: when he's faced with the reckless generosity of his manager, he chooses to commend that generosity — even though the manager has lost him money. If the rich man loved and served his wealth over everything else, he wouldn't find it in his heart to extend forgiveness and approval to his manager.

As with most of Jesus's stories, it is not really possible to assign strict roles in this parable. The rich man is not straightforwardly God, and the manager is not straightforwardly us. But perhaps the story, like other parables, offers us *glimpses* of the divine. Where there is forgiveness, there is God. Where there is unburdening, where there is liberation, where there is crazy, radical generosity — that is where we find God. And where God is? Well, that's where we should seek to be as well.

The parable of the dishonest manager reminds us to tread lightly when it comes to the words and stories of Jesus. To approach with humility, to hold a place for mystery, and to refrain from narrowing down one particular meaning once and for all. Jesus leaves us with some openness to various meanings, truths, and possibilities. But our calling, still, is to live as children of light in a world that sorely needs grace, forgiveness, healing and freedom. I pray that

we will enter into that calling with our whole hearts and minds — creatively, urgently, shrewdly — using the life and resources that God has entrusted us to manage.