

Shrewd Servants and Faithful Followers

Luke 16:1-13

Crossroads Christian Church

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

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By Michael E. Dixon

On most Sundays, I preach from the lectionary—that's a 3-year series of Bible readings that go across denominational lines. A good thing about using the lectionary is it challenges you to preach on texts that you might not otherwise choose. A bad thing about using the lectionary is it challenges you to preach on texts that you might not otherwise choose. Last Sunday's Gospel text was two beautiful parables—comparisons—to show what God's reign is like—that God, and God's people—celebrate when the lost are found. Pure Gospel! Pure good news!

Today, though, we heard Jesus tell another story and give some teachings after it. This one's tougher. Maybe you experienced a sense of disconnect when you heard it read. Jesus told a story about a crook, a cheat, a scam artist, a guy whose ethics are totally suspect. And Jesus didn't condemn the guy; he said that there was something we could learn from him. Now that's just strange, isn't it? Didn't Jesus say that if you're faithful with the small things, you'll be trusted with the bigger things? It just doesn't seem to hang together.

So what do you think? We all enjoy good caper movies, like the *Sting*, where con men with style manage to manage to steal a fortune from someone who shouldn't have had it in the first place, even though we'd never try such a thing.

So was Jesus telling a good caper story just to get his audience's attention? In a day when high corporate officers get richer by draining their employees' pension plans, in a day when politicians get their marching orders from the lobbyists who bankroll their campaigns rather than from the voters, it sort of sets my teeth on edge to think that Jesus was okay with this kind of behavior.

So I started digging into it a little. First, I discovered that this isn't a parable where God is the master. Unlike the

parable of the Prodigal Son, where God is the waiting father, this is a secular parable. It isn't that God approves the antics of the shrewd steward, it's just the steward's own equally shrewd boss who does. So what kind of parable is it? It's a comparison parable; an if—then parable. Jesus told a lot of those. If a sinful human father gives his child good things, then won't your perfect heavenly Father do even better? If a crooked judge can be badgered by a persistent widow to give her justice, then won't a loving, caring God not do even better? Mary Schertz in the Christian Century puts it this way: "If even a shifty steward realizes that relationships are more important than money, how much more should the children of the light realize that 'true riches' have to do with relationships rather than wealth or possessions?"¹

This is a parable about a steward, and Jesus goes on to teach about our stewardship to God. Remember the song, "I don't care too much for money 'cause money can't buy me love?" Here we have a steward, a business manager, who could have just taken the money and run, but what he did instead was to use the money creatively to make friends, both for him and his manager. So maybe Jesus was saying that it's a matter of proportion. Our treasures shouldn't rule us, but they should be tools for creating good out of bad situations. There's a saying that we should love people and use things, but instead we love things and use people. So Jesus was telling us to use our resources wisely and creatively, so that good things may happen. That's back to the if—then parable. If schemers and crooks can use their resources creatively, shouldn't honest people, Christians, have a kind of sanctified shrewdness?

That's why, at the end of the Parable, Jesus says, according to the Message, "If you're honest in small things, you'll be honest in big things; If you're a crook in small things, you'll be a crook in big things. If you're not honest in small jobs,

¹ Mary Schertz, "Living by the Word, Christian Century Sep. 4.

who will put you in charge of the store?

No worker can serve two bosses:

He'll either hate the first and love the second

Or adore the first and despise the second.

You can't serve both God and the Bank.

Jesus didn't want us to be naïve and gullible. In Matthew's gospel, he said for us to be wise as serpents, but innocent—or harmless--as doves. We can have street smarts and still be honest and fair. We can use our resources wisely and creatively.

At a church I served way back when, up in Iowa, the property chair and I were in the sanctuary. He pointed to a thermostat that was prominently on the wall up front between the choir loft and the chance. "That thermostat doesn't work, you know, it isn't hooked up to anything. It was just left over after we remodeled the sanctuary 20 years ago." So I asked why they left it there. "I leave it there because people like to go up and set it when they feel too hot or too cold. It lets them feel they're in control." A placebo thermostat. A property chair who was wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove.

On October 13, we're going to be having Dedication Sunday where we turn in our estimates for giving for next year. So it's convenient that we begin now thinking about stewardship, even though today's story is about a bad steward who had to get creative. Stewardship is about commitment to God, and using that which God has given us for God's glory. It's not as much about supporting a church budget as it is about ordering our lives so that God's will is our priority. And it isn't just about how rich people invest millions into charitable foundations whose names are rattled off after PBS and NPR programs, it's about everyday people and everyday life. It's about the way we live our daily lives and make our daily decisions. And stewardship isn't just about the way we manage money, it's the way we structure our lives. It's how we use the time, the energy, the creativity, the compassion that God gives us.

So what about the way that we live out our stewardship?

Fred Craddock puts it this way: "Life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat."² Or we could add to Fred Craddock's list, going to a committee meeting or choir practice, writing a check for the offering, or setting something aside for Beacon, or visiting with family members at a funeral parlor, or doing our daily job with love and care. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."

But in addition to being a story about a scoundrel who gets off the hook, a bad steward who becomes a good steward only because he's desperate, it's also a parable about forgiveness. The Rev. Whitney Rice, an Episcopalian priest, puts it so very well:

"Jesus knows that our lives are not black and white, and he also knows that we need guidance to live out of our better selves. And so he gives us the gift of forgiveness. He offers his forgiveness openly, freely and without restraint. There is nothing we can ever do that will take God's love away from us. There is no way we will ever be anything less than God's most cherished children, no matter how many mistakes we make or people we hurt. We are forgiven before we know we are going to do wrong, because Jesus loved us even unto death.

And knowing that forgiveness is ours for the asking at every step of the way, how can we not want to try it out ourselves?

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”
That’s what happens in this parable.” (unquote)ⁱ³

We try to be good stewards. Sometimes we screw up.
But we are always offered the same amazing grace, the
same overwhelming generosity of a loving God. Amen.

² Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary, John
Knox Press, 1990, p. 192.

³ Whitney Rice, “The Dishonest Manager in All of Us,” Sermons that Work, Episcopaldigitalnetwork.com.