

C Lectionary 25.9.22.19

Luke 16:1-13

Focus Statement: God entrusts us with much.

If you had to guess, what topic do you think Jesus talked about the most in the Gospels?

Answer: the kingdom of God. What do you think is the second most popular topic Jesus taught on? Answer: money. Yep, a sermon about money, not just for stewardship season anymore. Nor should it have ever been confined to stewardship season, because clearly Jesus felt that money and wealth were important topics to speak of. Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables, and a whopping one in ten verse in the Gospels deal with the topic of money, how we use it, how we get it, and how it can use us. So buckle up, dear people of God. Because yes, it's September 22nd, and the time for pledge cards is a month away, but it's time to talk about money.

So we've got this parable this morning, which one of the commentaries I read described as, and I quote, "difficult to read and difficult to preach." Awesome, these are always fun. And this parable of the absentee landlord and the dishonest manager does feel both difficult to read and to preach. Especially at the end, where the manager cuts the debts owed to the master, the master praises him for acting shrewdly—not normally an adjective we associate with uprightness and Godly living—and Jesus says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." Wait, what? "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" is not logic we generally think of as coming from Jesus, nor is "use wealth to get what you need," so what is Jesus trying to get at here?

Before we get into the parable itself, it is important to notice the shift in audience here. Last week's parables of the lost sheep, coin, and the skipped parable of the prodigal son were all addressed to the Pharisees. But today we read that Jesus said to his disciples, "There was a rich man..." This is an important distinction to notice, because it tells us that this is insider knowledge. This isn't the sermon on the mount or the feeding of the five-thousand or the healing of some passerby. This is teaching for those whom were closest to him, who'd been traveling with him, who knew him. Which means this is going to be a hard teaching, a teaching meant to challenge, push, even test those who heard it. The message of the Gospel is described as one meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and when Jesus spoke to his followers, he always seemed focused on making sure they didn't get too comfortable.

So we've got this manager, whom the parable tells us had charges brought against him to his master, "that this man was squandering his property." And like last's week's question about the definition of who is a sinner and who is righteous, the question here is, who is defining what it means to squander property? Is the manager defining it, is he legit bad at his job? Is the absentee landlord defining it, how does he know what property he has from a distance? Or is whoever reported on the manager defining it, and what motivations might this unnamed third party bring to the story? Whatever's happening here with the so-called squandered property, the result was this: The manager was informed he needed to get the accounts in order, because he was out of a job. Oftentimes nowadays when someone finds themselves out of a job, especially a job in finance, rather than given time to organize the books, they are ceremoniously escorted out of the building. And this parable

shows us the wisdom of that move, as with this additional time the manager came up with a scheme to provide for himself once he was no longer under the master's employ. He called in several of the master's debtors and dramatically cut the amount they owed. Now it's a bit unclear here what exactly the manager was doing. Theologian R. Alan Culpepper offers three possibilities. The manager could have been a) cheating the master by reducing the size of the debt owed, b) deducting the interest, thus acting rightly in bringing the master in line with the Deuteronomic law against charging interest, or c) cutting the portion of the debt that was the manager's own commission. Whatever the motivation, the master praised the manager for his shrewdness, a move that seems strange and unlikely since in at least two of the options the master ended up with less money than he was supposed to have, and Jesus encouraged the disciples to use dishonest wealth to make friends for themselves. So, still the question, what is going on here? Is the manager the hero of the story? Who are we? Does Jesus want us to cheat the cheaters to advance the kingdom? Or make friends for ourselves with dishonest wealth so that we can obtain security? But verses ten to thirteen seem to contradict that, with their disregard for dishonesty and the admonition that you cannot serve God and wealth. Is it faithful to be faithful with dishonest wealth? Was the manager serving God or himself in cutting the debts of the debtors? And, most importantly, what does this parable say to us in a world where finances are measured not in jugs of oil and containers of wheat, but in credit card debt, student loan payments, mortgages, stock-options, tax credits, and 401Ks. How are we to be shrewdly faithful?

Guess what friends, I cannot answer that question for you. And neither, sadly, can scripture.

I think a lot of times we want scripture to do that for us, or at least, I want it to do that for

me. To give me a simple answer for exactly how I should act and what I should do in order to live rightly with God and my neighbor. The problem is Jesus almost never gave straight answers, and on the rare times he did, they were always to introductory problems.

Remember a few weeks ago, Jesus turned to a large crowd and said, “none of you can be my disciples if you do not give up all of your possessions”? And we all thought, you can’t possibly mean that Jesus, that’s impossible! Well, this morning he told his disciples the parable of the dishonest manager, and suddenly getting rid of all our possessions, if not practically easier, seems at least conceptually easier. I know at least what it would look like to give away all my possessions, even though I cannot actually do it. But this, to faithfully and shrewdly manage dishonest wealth, that I am less confident in my ability to balance.

Friends, rather than answers, I think the gift this parable is offering us is questions.

Because there is no one sized fits all answer for how we manage our personal finances.

Leviticus chapter twenty-seven goes into great detail on how much is due to God, but the amounts are given in shekels, and they vary by the giver’s age and gender, and the priest’s assessment of the value, and whether the animal is a firstling, unless it is an unclean animal and then it needs to be assessed and given at one-fifth it’s value, and all of this changes if it’s a Jubilee year. So go ahead and try to figure out the conversion rate between a ritually clean firstling animal and 2019 US dollars, net or gross income, accumulated interest minus interest on debt, etc. We joke at stewardship time that your pledges are between you and God and Doug, because Doug is the financial secretary and does all the tallying, but the reality is even if we published the exact amount of everyone’s giving on a billboard somewhere, your pledge is between you and God, because only you and God know what

that amount of money means to you. It is possible to make the largest financial contribution and still be the least generous, and conversely it is possible to give nothing but your time and be the most. Rather than give answers, what this parable does it invites us to wrestle with the questions money poses, and there are many, and it challenges us to ask ourselves who am I serving, am I serving God or money. Because it is possible to serve God with money, but it is also too easy to discover that our money is being served by us.

So consider this parable an opportunity, dear people of God, to think about your finances and whether you are using them, or if they may be using you. And this is complicated stuff, so I invite you to lean further in, to ask bigger questions, than can you up your pledge amount this year. Let this parable challenge you to think about where you spend your money, even on essential items. Does it go to people who are doing ethical work in the world, does it support things you care about? If you think, Pastor's not talking to me, I'm broke, hang on. If you are a part of the US economic system, and you are, you're a part of this conversation. You can shop at consignment stores that support good causes, you can share your resources, you can splurge on that kid's girl scout cookies because you like cookies and supporting small children, these are all financial decisions that can be made by any of us at any income level. If you need to make a large purchase this year, a car or a lawn mower or a water heater, how do the choices you make reflect your values? Do you need a large car, that's maybe less fuel efficient, because you spend your time helping senior get to appointments or hauling kids to soccer practice? Or is it just you most of the time, and something more environmentally friendly is a better fit? See how there are two right answers to that question. And of course, if you are lucky enough to have some

resources, the questions get harder. Who are your investments with, and who are those investments benefitting? Are there corporations who don't support your values who you need to divest from? Or is it more beneficial to stay invested, to have a say at the table, and to work for reform that way? Again, no one right answer, just a whole bunch of questions.

And here, at last, is the good news, dear people of God. Asking these questions, thinking about finances, wrestling with the ambiguity of these issues again and again and again, that in and of itself is an act of good stewardship, it is a way of being faithful. Yes it would be way easier if Jesus would just tell us how much we owe him every week, if Jesus would just send us a bill like the gas company, and we could pay it. But Jesus is not the gas company, and faith is not a transactional relationship. The fact is we don't owe Jesus anything, because no amount of money could ever be enough for the gift we have received in Christ's death and resurrection. Everything we do is a response to that gift which we already have. The opportunity and ability to manage our resources, however large or small they may be, is in itself a gift, it is a way for us to grow closer to God through the act of asking questions, learning, and challenging ourselves to lean in further. These hard and simple acts of faith are opportunities to strive for the kingdom. Theologian Fred Craddock reflected on this passage: "Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with a queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. Most likely this 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. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." How will you be faithful this week? Thanks be to God. Amen.