

Luke 16:1-13
9/18/16—Pentecost 18C

Psalm 79:9, 13
I Timothy 2:1-7

Stewards

Just within the last few years, local United Methodist churches in our Conference have received a number of e-mails warning us about a scam being perpetrated in this country. In several states, persons claiming to be United Methodist *bishops* were calling churches with the story that a single mother and her children had had their car break down on the interstate and were stranded. After which the caller requested that the congregation send money to help them. These callers had been convincing in posing as bishops of our Church, and quite persuasive in appealing for funds. And such scam attempts—albeit unsuccessful—happened right here in South Carolina, when imposters on the phone did their best to sound like our own Bishop Jonathan Holston.

Scams abound. We read about them in them in the morning paper. We hear about them on the evening news. Scoundrels and rogues and thieves—oh my! Inside traders and swindlers and cheats who con vulnerable senior citizens out of their life savings. Cyber-criminals who deal in fraud and identity theft. White-collar

embezzlers who rationalize that a big corporation can easily afford to lose a few thousand here and there. That it won't be missed.

This old world still seems filled with dishonesty rooted in greed. Just as it did in the time of Jesus.

No wonder Jesus devotes such a substantial portion of his message to the subject of money and possessions. Could his words be intended for our twenty-first century North American consumer culture, with the lion's share of the world's resources, goods, and wealth? Jesus advises: *Let anyone with ears listen!*

As his journey takes him ever-closer to Jerusalem and to the cross, Jesus has been teaching about wealth. And our attitudes toward it. And our stewardship of it. He's told a parable about a rich fool. He's talked about calculating the cost before beginning a major undertaking. He's offered the story of a son who prodigally squanders his father's property.

And right after that, in today's reading from Luke's Gospel, we hear Jesus weave another tale of a dishonest manager who's also been squandering the property of another—in this case, the assets of his rich employer. To put it in contemporary terms, this guy has been padding the expense account. Using the company

car for his own personal purposes. Helping himself to office supplies. Not to mention cooking the books!

Eventually, the owner of the business gets wind of it and calls him on the carpet, demanding that he account for what he's done. He's being sacked. Canned. Fired!

Faced with the prospect of starvation, he reviews his options. Manual labor? Forget it. Panhandling? He's too proud to beg. But he conjures up a daring plan. While cleaning out his desk, he goes through the accounts receivable records of this large commercial operation. Then he wines and dines the boss's clients—wheeling and dealing with these unsuspecting folk who think he's still on the company payroll. He slashes the amount of their total debt, drastically reducing the sizable sums they owe his boss. This crafty steward knows that once the balances have been decreased, it would be awkward for the boss to collect the original amounts owed. And as a result—after he finds himself turned out on the street—those grateful debtors will take him in. It's a cunning scheme.

But what happens next is strange. You'd think his boss—his master—would be furious. But instead, he actually *praises* this wily fellow for his shrewdness in assuring his future.

You know, just when we think that the Scriptures can't surprise us any more, they do. More than a few times, Jesus himself shocks us with the revelation of a new way of living—a radically different way of life in his reign. Today, Jesus shocks us.

Because it sounds rather like *he* is praising this trickster, too! What's up with *that*?

This perplexing parable presents problems in our understanding. It almost sounds as though Jesus is suggesting that dishonesty and cheating is the way to get ahead. And that *sure* doesn't sound like the Jesus we know!

So let's take a closer look at how Jesus sums up this story for his disciples—for the twelve, and for you and me as well. He invites you to *use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it's gone, you'll be welcomed into eternal dwellings.*

My sisters and brothers, I think the key word here is the word *use*. Because wealth is not an idol to be worshipped. It's just a commodity. It's just a medium of exchange. Its purpose is to be used. This Sunday, across time and space, Jesus' good counsel comes to us. *Use wealth*, he urges. *Don't let it use you. Let wealth, if you have it, serve you. Don't serve it. You can't serve both God and money.*

It can't be done! Either you're the master of wealth, or *it* masters *you*. Controls you. You begin to love it.

But wait! The first and greatest commandment is to *love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*. When you love God with your whole being, that love so fills you that there's no room left in you for the love of money and the things it can buy. You can't love money and also love the One in the psalmist's song: the God of salvation, the God of deliverance, the God of forgiveness.

The God who has given all that you and I have. Because God has also given all that we *are*, we belong to God. In a very real sense, our bodies, our intellects, our spirits have been entrusted to us. Entrusted.

Now a steward is one who has been entrusted with the property of another. And just as the manager in Jesus' story is a steward of his master's property, so too, you and I are stewards of all that God has given: our talents and abilities, in addition to our bank accounts. We came into this world with nothing, and when we leave it, we can take nothing with us. All that we have is on loan to us. Entrusted into our care by a loving, gracious, generous God. And Jesus challenges you to use what's been entrusted to

you—including worldly wealth—in such a way that when it's gone, the *true* riches will be yours.

Clayton Schmit tells of a rich young man who came to church to learn about salvation. He came from a long line of Northern European Christians, but had himself fallen away from the family tradition. In reflecting on his heritage, he decided that he should return to the family faith and join the church. So he came forward with his wife and baby one Sunday morning and was baptized. He answered the baptismal questions. He made the vows. He spoke with commitment. The next week, in his Sunday school class, the discussion turned to stewardship. He learned that, in accordance with the biblical mandate, Christians are called to give ten percent of their income to God's work through the church. A quick calculation brought him to a sad realization: Ten percent of his wealth was a large sum. If the church expected that amount of money from him, he concluded, he was in the wrong place. He left the church that day and never returned. He was caught in a dilemma. He couldn't give himself away. Consequently, he was not in a position to receive what God wanted to give *him*: an everlasting home in God's love.

This everlasting home is what Jesus is talking about today. With this parable of a shrewd steward, Jesus instills in us the awareness that following him to that home means taking risks. Means acting decisively, confidently, boldly, in the knowledge that God holds the future and that our future is with God. Will we *use* our God-given gifts—our abilities, our talents, *and* our tithes—to serve Christ’s kingdom? To advance its coming? To live into the love of neighbor by using what we have to help those who need it most? John Wesley makes clear how you and I are to do these things when he instructs us to “Earn all you can. Save all you can. And *give* all you can.”

For Wesley, that’s what we’re to do if we would be found trustworthy stewards. If we would be worthy of the trust that’s been placed in us.

But sometimes we do nothing with all that God has entrusted to us because we think: *I’m just one insignificant little person. How can I possibly make a difference in this broken, hurting world?* But for most of us, being a faithful steward isn’t about making grand gestures or performing heroic deeds.

For most of us, it’s about acts of self-giving. It’s about acts of love. Like writing a note. Sending a card. Preparing a meal.

Telling a story. Making a visit. Seemingly inconsequential acts. But they're acts that truly matter because, as Jesus affirms:
Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.

Jesus wants us to know that if we hope to receive the real treasure—the heavenly treasure—we've got to be faithful stewards of the worldly wealth that's been entrusted to us on this journey. In our faithfulness, we're called to be imitators of the One who is faithful. Great is God's faithfulness and great is God's love. A love so immeasurable that God sent God's own Son to do something about the debt we owe. About our debt of sin.

You and I come at last to a deeper understanding of this odd parable of a steward who reduces staggering debts owed to his master, when we remember that on a dark Jerusalem hillside, Christ Jesus *our* Master did something about *our* staggering debt. But he didn't just reduce it. Christ our Master *cancel*s our debt. Christ our Master erases our debt. Christ our Master wipes it away. Christ our Master offers pardon and mercy and grace and redemption to you and me. Debtors all!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.