

## The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost | 20C

Sunday, September 18, 2022 • Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church

[Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#) | [Psalm 79:1-9](#) | [1 Timothy 2:1-7](#) | [Luke 16:1-13](#)

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I can't help but think that the writer of the Gospel of Luke must have enjoyed compiling Jesus's parables in the run up to our reading for today. Last week we heard the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin from chapter 15 which concludes with the parable of the gracious father (sometimes called the parable of the prodigal son); but as we turn to chapter 16 and today's parable, it feels as though the evangelist is saying: 'So you think you've got this parable thing figured out, huh? Well hold on to your hat, because this next one is a doozie!'

Today we hear the parable of the shrewd or astute manager; and I want to point out how important words are when reading the parables because they affect how we interpret and learn from this unique storytelling genre that Jesus was apparently so fond of. In one of the Bibles I referenced, this story is given the heading "The Parable of the Dishonest Manager." In another, it's called "The Story of the Crooked Manager." Both of these headings run the risk of making up our minds for us about the parable's main character before we've even heard the story. And so I want to offer two reminders before we attempt to explore this parable and listen for what God might be saying to us through it today.

#1: Jesus didn't give his parables titles and neither did the evangelists. They were added much later by editors and publishers; and I think they sometimes do more harm than good. So *I give you permission to skip the headings and just read the text!*

And #2: Parables are not all allegories ... we don't have to figure out which character is God or Jesus and which character is us ... sometimes that works, sometimes that's helpful, sometimes a parable refuses to be so neatly *understood* — and I think this is the case with our Shrewd Manager today.

So let's make our way through this story carefully, paying attention to the details that are often easily overlooked:

As I was reading closely in preparation for this sermon, I noticed something for the first time. The first words of the parable tell us the manager was *accused* of squandering his boss's assets, yet the manager is immediately fired so I always just assumed he was guilty. But that's not what the text tells us. He is accused and then fired ... perhaps the boss overreacted? But the manager turns around and acts shrewdly, wisely, creatively; and ends up flipping the script.

We know that charging interest is expressly forbidden by the law in Deuteronomy 23, but apparently everyone was doing it anyway (seems like not much has changed, huh?). So by having the debtors reduce their debts, our creative manager uses a corrupt system to his advantage, and his boss has no choice but to applaud him in the end.

Perhaps Jesus is pointing out the fact that it's difficult to be honest in a system that is already so corrupt; and so we might pause and ask ourselves: how do our systems make an ethical life difficult or even impossible for some people?

Now the forgiveness of debts should ring a bell for us - as I imagine Jesus intended - his hearers would have immediately likened what the manager did to the practice of the Jubilee: an event that occurred in multiples of seven years when all debts, indentured servitude, and even land ownership and cultivation were canceled in a sort of *great reset*. Because in God's economy, wealth is not accrued ... "serving God means that **loving people** is always the bottom line."

After the parable, Luke gives Jesus what I find to be one of the wildest 'red letter' sayings in the Bible: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Jesus preached a radical message about the Commonwealth of God - a structure and way of living so unlike

what the people of his day knew or could even imagine that he had to use a myriad of metaphor and simile to even attempt to describe it. And, of course, this notion of God's Commonwealth is completely foreign to us as well - situated as we are in complex and deep-seated structures based on oppression, inequality and accruing rather than sharing resources and relationships. Now Jesus isn't telling us to behave badly ... well, not exactly. I think what he's describing is what prophetic voice of the Civil Rights movement, John Lewis, called getting into '*good trouble.*' That is, making ourselves and those around us uncomfortable with the Good News of God's dream for all of us.

We are called to be Robin Hoods for Jesus and like our shrewd manager to engage in 'Holy Squandering' with our resources - because, after all, we cannot follow Jesus and continue to sit at the tables that he overturned. *THIS* is the only table to which God calls us, and it is big enough and bountiful enough to seat and feed the whole world.

Our text from 1 Timothy reminds us to make supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings - - *for everyone* - - talk about squandering resources! But when Jesus talked about bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to prisoners, and announcing the year of Jubilee ... I think he *meant it*.

And so I'll close with a sort of benediction written by Rob Siltanen and made famous in Apple's 1997 "Think Different" campaign. It is an invitation for us to follow the example of the shrewd manager as we strive to follow Jesus and bring about God's reign of Love:

Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.

**Amen.**