

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 16:1-13

September 19, 2010
“Shrewd Investments”

the Rev. Michelle Slater

Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” Then the manager said to himself, “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” Then he asked another, “And how much do you owe?” He replied, “A hundred containers of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill and make it eighty.” And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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.

‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’

If I were to ask you your favourite parable, the short story of Jesus that gives you the most comfort, I suspect you’d say the one about the good Samaritan, who crosses ethnic and religious boundaries to help someone injured and in need. Or, you might say, the parable about the lost sheep, that the shepherd risks everything to go and find. Or may, the one about the lost coin that the woman devotes time and energy to find, leaving all else aside. Or, very likely, you might mention the parable of the prodigal son. The one where the son takes his inheritance and leaves, then squanders it, and comes crawling home to beg, only to find his father running out to meet him, to welcome him home with rejoicing and celebration.

And it’s easy to see why these are our favourites. They are all, in some way, about the extravagant love and grace of God, the one who is relentlessly loving in pursuit of the one who strays, the one who crosses all boundaries and borders to bring help and healing and who calls us to embody that same love and grace.

I can bet that none of us would say that the parable we heard this morning, the parable of the unjust or dishonest manager, is our favourite. Because not only does not make sense, it actually offends our sense of justice and fairness. A rich man hears a rumour that his manager has been stealing from his coffers. The boss, of course, fires him on the spot, demanding that

the crook hand over the books so he can see just what exactly he's done with his accounts.

So the manager has a crisis on his hands. Not only has he lost his job, but the public shame once his disgrace is revealed will make it hard to get another one. So he comes up with a plan to save his own skin. Before they can hear the news, he calls up his boss's debtors. Whatever they owe, he slices off part of the bill, making life easier for those who owe the boss money, winning their approval and goodwill, and hopefully, gaining a good chance of getting a job with them, or someone else they can recommend him to. In the process, of course, he ends up cheating his boss again. And when the rich man gets wind of it, instead of hauling him before the authorities and charging him with theft, as we would do, as he SHOULD do, he says, "Ah, well done. You've been very clever and acted shrewdly." The end.

We know from other parables of Jesus that when there's a master, or landlord, or rich man of some kind, it's usually a stand-in or symbol for God. So if the rich man is God, then the manager is probably meant to be...us. But what kind of parable is that? Is Jesus encouraging us to be dishonest, to cheat and steal from our employers? That seems hard to believe.

What on earth might God be saying to us through this parable today? Perhaps if there's a clue at the very beginning: "Then Jesus said to the disciples..." Then Jesus said...*to the disciples*. Our favourite parables, about lost and found sons, and coins, and sheep, the ones about God's extravagant grace and welcome, were spoken to the community and religious leaders, the ones who couldn't believe that the door to God's kingdom would be open to the wrong kind of people.

But this parable is actually addressed to the disciples, those who are trying to follow Jesus, wherever difficult place he might go, whatever confusing demands he might make of his followers. In other words, it's addressed to us, we who are doing the best we can to follow Jesus, walk in his footsteps, and live according to his example.

And the one whose actions Jesus commends is the manager of the rich man's estate. When he suddenly finds himself in a crisis, with his life about to change radically for the worse, he responds not by throwing himself on his boss's feet and begging for forgiveness, or by trying to make restitution for what he has lost.

Rather, he remembers that none of that property actually belongs to him. He begins to relinquish his grasp, to let go of all that stuff — money, property, assets, influence — that had been so important to him. And then, he uses what he does have: leverage. Ordered to settle all the accounts, out he goes to do just that, and he settles them in such a way that he invests in *relationships* for his own survival. He can only do this, once he's lost it all. But there's a curious result to all this loss... it begins to look like gain. Gain for him, and gain for the boss, who suddenly becomes the hero who, through his manager, has unexpectedly forgiven debts and given all those debtors a fresh start.

Forgiving debts on behalf of the boss. There's something about that, that rings a bell, that reminds me of all the times Jesus forgives, in the name of God, those who come to him, looking for healing and redemption. Perhaps it's a clue that this crooked manager shows in some way the work of Christ. He knows in the crisis that none of it is his, just as Jesus knows, so

clearly, that everything comes from God. And the manager uses his influence not to put as much cash aside as he can gather, but to invest in people, to put his energy into relationships. This, of course, is Jesus' way as well. Maybe, in telling this confusing, difficult parable to the disciples, to us, Jesus is saying, "Follow me, a crook who died on cross, between two other crooks. Die to any inclination you have to pursue wealth for its own sake. Use wealth as leverage to invest in people, just as I do. And when you die to wealth in this way, you rise, and so do you the people you invest in."

Perhaps, then, this parable is about God's grace after all, and how that grace can only work through us when we are at a crisis point, when we are desperate enough that what we've been doing, how we've been living, just doesn't work anymore. Jesus tells this parable because he knows that grace only works on those it finds dead enough to raise.

For those of us in leadership in the church, not just this church but many across our city and country, it looks like just such a crisis point may be on the horizon. We know that the ways we've been church in the last hundred years, or even the last fifty years, are not sufficient to meet the needs of our radically shifting culture. Just this week, I was invited to take part in a web-based seminar by the Alban Institute, a church development organization in the US, with titles like, "We Can't Keep Going Like This?—Reframing a Crisis of Viability as a Chance for Change," and "What Choices Do We Have?—Evaluating the Options in a Time of Transition."

As we wrestle with falling numbers and increasing costs, we are becoming aware, at least in the United Church congregations in our part of the city, that indeed, "we can't keep going like this." The question Jesus faces us with in today's parable is, "how shrewd will we be with our investments?" For just like the manager, we know that despite appearances, they're not actually our resources, are they: this building, these pews, those computers in the church offices, those meeting rooms, those bank accounts that receive our offerings each week. They're not ours, but God's, who has entrusted them to us to use for leverage, for social capital, for enhanced relationships among us, and with our community, and with the world.

In two weeks, we'll be meeting after church to consider a vision statement that a group in our congregation has been working on. Last June, the team, led by Rev. Brenda Fawkes, asked for your responses to questions like, "What brought you to Dunbar Heights United initially?", "What keeps you here?" and, "What ministries are most important to you?" The process has been begun by Council, and with your blessing, because we are coming to a crisis point: not today, not next month and not even next year...but sometime in the next few years. With an aging building that is increasingly expensive to maintain, never mind upgrade, survival itself seems a challenge.

Yet we are not called by God merely to survive this crisis, but like the crooked manager, to imagine how we can use what has been entrusted to our care to improve life and relationships for our neighbours and world. And so, after we consider the draft vision for ministry and mission that the Vision Team is preparing for us on October 3rd, we'll then be asked to commission a team from the congregation, along with an external consultant, to forge a plan. This Strategic Planning team will bring together our Vision for Ministry, with our current

ministries and programs, and with our building and resources as they now exist, and develop for us a plan of how we can make use of all these resources for a new time and a new context, including some risky suggestions for how we might raise new resources.

And like the dishonest yet commendable manager of Jesus' parable, it may involve loss for us, before it becomes gain. Loss of the ways we used to be church, which are familiar and comfortable and beloved because they worked, for so long. It may even involve the loss of our building, at least in its current configuration. Yet like the manager, once we let go, we begin to know how to respond. Holding loosely to what we used to think of as "our" resources, we start to place all we have in service to God. We start to use our wealth, all of our resources — money, skills, time — to invest in people, to put our time and money into relationships. We realize that in God's economy, generosity for the sake of the kingdom is the shrewdest investment.

And soon enough, what looked like loss will come, inevitably, to look like gain. For the more we see our resources not as "ours" but as the overflow of God's abundant grace, to be "squandered," scattered freely, to the end of making friends and setting people free, the less we are controlled by anxiety and fear. And the freer we are to live in and through that abundant grace, with our relationships with those around us deepened and richer.

May it be so for us. Amen.