

Pentecost 15, Proper 20C - September 21, 2025

Season of Creation

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Psalm 79:1-9

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

Desperate, Bewildered, and Shrewd

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA*

I would like to start by saying that I understand that each of us who is gathered here together to worship today... brings unique needs and hungers... especially in times that feel chaotic and unnerving. We come here together with the burdens and fears we carry... to lay them down for a time and be nourished with God's good news and Christ's living presence. We come to know peace and hope that we may go forth from this place strengthened by God's abiding love and vision for us and for the world. We look to our ancestors whose stories tell us about wayward human tendencies and about how Jesus who came to show us... in the flesh... and to teach us... a better way. The gospel that we look to as a people of faith... has a central message of God's abiding love and longing for our return. Sometimes we need to dig more deeply to find the meaning in the text than in other times... and today Jesus is offering us a most "interesting" story to delve into and find some meaning for our moment. So let us begin...

Clearly, our lessons, today, are heavy! ...and the parable we heard today is simply bewildering! A shrewd and dishonest manager is trying to save his own skin... by cutting the bills of tenant farmers... Why? Maybe he is doing so to save his own skin. Maybe he is cheating his boss and helping the tenant farmers he collects from... so that the farmers might take care of him if he is thrown out of his job and into the streets. In telling this story... is Jesus trying to suggest that dishonesty can be a virtue? Is the parable about compassion? Is it about forgiveness? Is it about grace? If anything, this parable... about a dishonest steward... offers us an over abundance of possibilities. ... So, where do we begin... as we consider that a dishonest steward who... in Jesus' telling of the tale... is actually commended by the rich boss he had swindled. What do we make of this story?

Jesus is offering this parable to a people who knew what it felt like to be occupied by the Romans... Romans who... requiring vast amounts of food and supplies for their legions... felt free to exploit the land and the labor of the people. A large tax was imposed on small landowners so that the military could get hold of the huge amounts of wine, wheat, and olive oil they needed. Tenant farmers... who had sold their land because of heavy taxes levied by the Romans, continued to be heavily taxed. It was the job of local stewards, who managed the land of absentee landowners, to collect the taxes that were paid in currencies of wine, wheat, and oil. It was the job of local managers to extract payments from desperate farmers... taxes that were paid as a percentage of the harvest. In this system, the rich got richer, the poor got poorer, and the gap between the rich and the poor became ever wider. Sound familiar? Maybe Jesus is giving us a grim and truthful portrait of the world as it is in our time... as he calls us to a different way... as he calls us to be "children of the light."

In the parable, the wealthy landowner considered the steward to be a squanderer. Maybe it is because the landowner felt that the steward wasn't squeezing the tenants hard enough. We know that the steward was terrified of losing his job and of being homeless and destitute. The steward knows himself well enough to realize that he is "not strong enough to dig" and that he is "too ashamed to beg"... and so he makes a plan. The steward sees a small window of opportunity in which to gain the loyalty of the tenant farmers by slashing their debts. He seeks to earn influence among the very same people he had pressured in the past. The prospect of being welcomed into homes, even the squalid homes of the poor, was a far better prospect than that of being cast out into the streets. With what little authority he has left, the steward summons those indebted to the master. He says to the first, "I see that you owe 100 jugs of olive oil. Let's cross out that number and make it 50 jugs. Your bill has been cut by 50%." To the next he says: "you owe 100 containers of wheat? Let's make that 80. You, my friend, have just received a 20% discount." And so forth. The manager could actually have been arrested for bilking the rich landowner. Instead... he is commended, he is given a pat on the back... for acting "shrewdly."

What changed... or rather... who changed? One might say that it was pure self-interest that inspired the dishonest steward to slash the bills of hardworking tenant farmers. One could take a different perspective and consider the possibility that the steward... like Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"... is shaken from a comfortable stupor by images of his own destitution and death. In this scenario, we might consider that the manager has been struck with a healthy dose of compassion for those who... in a harsh world... were struggling to make ends meet.

At the end of the parable we hear Jesus say, "You cannot serve God and wealth." I prefer the older translations that actually personify the word "wealth." Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and Mammon." Simply put, to serve anything or anyone other than God... is considered idolatry. In the ancient world, and in many corners of our modern world, there is a belief that wealth is a sign of God's favor. In our time, the "Prosperity Gospel" is a belief, among some Protestant Christians, that (*according to Wikipedia*):

"...financial blessings and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth."

Those who adhere to a prosperity gospel believe that... if faith, speech, and actions are all on "target"... there will be a direct reward from God. The evidence of God's favor will be hefty bank accounts and an accumulation of fine possessions. But today's parable is about far more than money, property, and possessions... and the parable in no way suggests that God's favor rests on the wealthy... the shrewd maybe, but not the wealthy. The parable ends with Jesus clearly saying that it is not possible to serve God and earthly wealth. The two are distinct and separate. In God's realm, wealth is measured in countercultural terms. True wealth is measured in an economy of love... in the quality of relationships, in the currencies of caring, compassion, service, and even personal sacrifice. The call is for metanoia... for a change of heart... for transformation. The call is to live radically different lives by shifting the focus from the nagging demands of seeking money and possessions... to a more liberating, radically fulfilling life in relationship with God, with the planet and her creatures, and with one another. Money is to be used in the service of relationships, not the other way around. One author puts it this way:

“Jesus is asking us to rehearse this lesson over and over, until we get it right. The parables he uses may get crazier and crazier, but until we get it right, he keeps repeating the lesson for us.”¹

And what is the lesson? The lesson is that God’s radical love for us demands a radical response. To be a follower of Jesus means giving up everything we had thought was important, and to start living a life grounded in God’s love and justice for all people and for the good creation. If we want to sit at the head of the table... we are required to give up our pride, our seat, and to live a radically different life. “It isn’t easy. It doesn’t make sense. ...and it costs everything.”² The gospel message is that by giving up stubborn ways that are not in alignment with God’s call to radical love and caring... we gain abundant life.

The story of the shrewd and dishonest manager shines a light on what truly matters and asks us to think and pray about how we, during our time on earth, are to be stewards of all we have been given... be it our relationships, our care for God’s creation, care for our bodies... all of it. In God’s realm, our words and our actions... matter. In a highly interconnected world, even the ways we choose to spend our dollars... matter.

We are called to be children of the light... called to live in the fullness of God’s love. Debbie Thomas says it well:

“Where there is forgiveness, there is God. Where there is unburdening, where there is liberation, where there is crazy, radical generosity – there is God. And where God is? Well, that is where we should seek to be as well.”³

Amen...

¹ Jo Anne Taylor, <https://pastorsings.com/2013/09/22/its-complicated-sermon-on-luke-161-13/>

² Ibid.

³ Debbie Thomas, “Notes to the Children of Light,” *Journey with Jesus*, September 15, 2019. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2365-notes-to-the-children-of-light>