



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY

AFTER PENTECOST

SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. Jo P. Popham

“No strings attached” – Luke 16:1-13

Throughout Luke's gospel we hear the emphasis on God's love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners, and lepers.¹ Jesus is neither oblivious to wealth, or naïve about it, according to the gospel writer, Luke, who according to the late great Fred Craddock, used practically every literary vehicle available to him to put the subject of money before the reader: listening to the song of Mary, hearing John the Baptist's sermons of repentance, quoting the prophesy of Isaiah 61:1-2, counting blessings and woes, and the parable of the rich fool”, and today's reading.² So why does Jesus instruct his disciples using a parable about an unjust steward? How did the story of the dishonest manager inform his followers, and how are we informed by this parable? And how can we understand this reading? Surely not as an allegory giving 1st and 21st hearers the opportunity to identify with any of the characters. No, let us look at this confusing story as a parable about the Kingdom of God. What does justice look like in God's Kingdom? Surely Jesus was not teaching the disciples – or teaching us – that we should imitate the actions of the dishonest manager. That would have been as repugnant to them as it is to us. What should be imitated – the steward's shrewdness in the use of possessions – even though the possessions were not his own? I think not!

I have always struggled to understand how the master could praise the unjust manager's behavior? How could he not punish “the rascal”?³ The steward who was running the master's estate was a rascal. Absentee landlords were common practice in 1st Century Palestine. This steward likely was embezzling goods from the master routinely. The debtors were rascals too. They owed rent to the landlord and paid in kind, with the produce that they raised on the estate. The steward knew that he going to lose his job when the landlord returned and his embezzlement was disclosed. So the steward came up with this scheme to cook the books and record much less than the debtors owed which

involved them in the deception. Now they were indebted to the steward himself. And then the master himself was a rascal for praising the manager for being so shrewd. Luke gives us real life lessons that we can take from the parable of the shrewd manager. Are the sons of the world wiser in their generation than the sons of light, meaning that the Christian should be as willing to be good stewards as we are ready to go all out to seek money and comfort? Do we spend more time and money and effort on pleasure – on hobbies, on our garden, or on sports than we do on the church? And our material possessions should be used to strengthen friendships wherein the real and permanent value of life lies – remembering that how we use our wealth to help others really affects our life now and our afterlife. We can either use our wealth selfishly or to make life easier for ourselves, our friends, and others. And how we complete a small task is the best proof of our fitness or unfitness to be trusted with a bigger task. And, finally, we really cannot serve two masters. Serving God cannot be a parttime pass time. We either belong to God totally or not at all.⁴

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to do what he must do to usher in God's kingdom here on earth. Yes, the “manager ... had been squandering the property; ... The manager reduced what renters owed the rich man to garner their favor, so that when he is out of work, they might look kindly on him.”⁵ The manager was decisive when faced with a crisis, and Jesus said not to waver in deciding to follow him and to carry on his message of God's kingdom. How is that? Well, the landowner did not retaliate. He didn't beat the steward; he did not punish him at all. In God's kingdom of justice and power, masters do not get even. Jesus taught non-retaliation. He taught them – and us – to love our enemies. But is the model – being dishonest with wealth and acting shrewdly to protect the relationships that might affect our future challenging by this parable? Yes.

The King James version – which likely is how most of us first heard today's Gospel story – reads: “Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; and when it fails you, they will receive you into everlasting habitations.” Are we to make friends for ourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone the children of light may welcome us into our eternal homes? The Greek word “mammon” is translated

as dishonest wealth, but “mammon” is very close to the same word in Hebrew and Aramaic that means *that in which one puts one’s trust*. In the Qumran Rule for the Community the understanding of mammon is clarified further to be simply an idiom for all money.⁶

Wealth does tend to lead us astray. Earthly goods do fail. So we must be prudent, yes, as the unjust steward in Jesus’s parable was prudent in using the things in his life to ensure his future. Think of all the good gifts of this life that have come from God. Our wealth is everything – everything that God has given us, and we must take care of God’s gifts so that we may be welcomed by the benevolent master when we enter into God’s kingdom. And take it one step forward, if we are to bring about the Kingdom on earth as in heaven – in the here and now – we really must care for all of God’s gifts to us.

Our stewardship campaign begins – NOW. The focus on good stewardship really is a year round process, even though the readings in the fall focus on Jesus’s teachings about stewardship. We may not look forward to this time of year when all three years in our lectionary mention money more than we may like. But truth be known it is Jim and my obligation to teach and preach on responsible stewardship of mammon.⁷ Yes, it is true. The canons have made it clear. This year’s program is entitled “More than enough.” If I have enough and most of us have enough, then together we have more than enough. I believe we do have more than enough – and St. Andrew’s By-the-Sea can go forward with the next steps we have discerned over 20 weeks this spring and summer of listening to the Holy Spirit during our Hear and Listen – Listen and Hear discernment project.

When we accept that our wealth is really God’s wealth we can go forward to live not as the shrewd manager or the owner or even the debtors (rascals though they all be) but as faithful stewards. When we give to the church, what we give out of our abundance is then God’s. It no longer is ours! Really? Yes! And the truth is that what we give to the church must be given with no strings attached.⁸ Should we restrict moneys from being used for a new air conditioner if it unexpectedly goes out in the heat of August? Or should someone pledge to give out of their abundance but only to the outreach ministries

of the church? No, what comes closest to giving from the heart? What if the roof is leaking over the sanctuary but not over the Blue door offices? Should that matter? Are we not fed by the eucharist to enable us to go into the world to be Jesus to all those we encounter, even, and most especially our Blue Door and Bike Shop clients? Yes, both and. Moneys best given to the church must generally be given with an open hand.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ In our time God loves all people, as the mission church Saint Elizabeth's in the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas states in their welcome, whether "single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, skinny as a rail or those who could afford to lose a few pounds. God loves you if you are homeless, or just got out of jail, whether you are soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, veterans, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-foodies, those in recovery, folks who are still addicted, those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, those who are inked, pierced or both, tourists, seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts, even us.

² Interpretation: Luke, Fred Craddock, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1990, p. 189, and see Luke 1:46-55, 3:10-14, 4:16-30, 6:20-25, and 16:1-13.

³ Chris Haslam, 2016 _ 2022, C15 Comments Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, A ministry of the Anglican Diocese of Montreal, Canada <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/cpr25m.shtml?>

⁴ William Barclay on Luke 16, www.studyithe.org/commentaries/dsb/luke-16.html.

⁵ Shrewd Christians (Luke 16:1-3) by Verity A. Jones. https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf20036fc/on_scripturethe_bible_shrewd_christians_luke_1613_by_verity_a_jones.

⁶ IQS 6:2, CD – Damascus Document – 14:20.

⁷ Duties of Rectors: It shall be the duty of rectors or priests-in-charge to ensure that all persons in their charge are instructed concerning Christian stewardship including: i. reverence for the creation and the right use of God's gifts; ii. Generous and consistent offering of time, talent, and treasure for the mission and ministry of the Church at home and abroad; iii. The Biblical standard of the tithe for financial stewardship; iv. The responsibility of all persons to make a will as prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer. [III.3.6 (b)(2)]

⁸ I have been in parishes where the wealthiest parishioners gave much but also expected much. Some tried to dictate what could and what should be preached, which way the altar should face, what color the doors to the parish hall could be painted, and even whether a female priest has the same authority as their male counterparts, and other repugnant things that I will not speak of.