

Fifteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Shrewd, You Say??"
Luke 16:1-13
September 17-18, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

If someone says, "Now **there's** a role model for kids!" who do we expect they're talking about? **Not** the sore loser on a professional sports team. **Not** the corrupt politician taking kickbacks for awarding government jobs. **Not** the teacher or coach convicted of abusing students. We want role models for kids – and for adults – who are honest, upstanding, caring, faithful to the best practices of whatever their career is, devoted to the people they serve: in short, folks with **integrity**.

So: this "parable of the dishonest steward" is puzzling! The manager is described as squandering his boss's money. We really don't know if he's incompetent, lazy, less than honest, or all of the above. The boss tells his failed manager, "You're fired!" Then the now unemployed fellow makes some underhanded deals so the people who owe his old boss money will be beholden to him and more apt to help him once his unemployment checks run out. Nothing to admire here! And yet, Jesus says, "*...his master [who was well aware of his former employee's shenanigans] commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.*" (Luke 16:8a) If someone is **shrewd**, he or she is clever, savvy, business-wise. The boss is thinking, "The guy's basically a loser, but I gotta give it to him, he figured out how to save his own bacon!"

Now, many people don't expect to find either humor or sarcasm in Scripture, but there are both. We find sarcasm in today's Gospel, and if we miss it we hear a really confusing message. Jesus says, "*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.*" (Luke 16:9)

We know He's kidding because Jesus would **never** tell us to be dishonest (let's remember those commandments, "Don't lie," "Don't steal"), and because the poor debtors in today's parable have nothing on earth and won't have any clout in Heaven, either, not to "*...welcome [the dishonest manager] into [his] eternal home.*"

So the only sense we can make out of this parable of the dishonest/crooked manager, is Jesus' observation that people who follow Him (us!) should be **at least** as **clever** and **creative** as this guy who has no scruples and no evident faith. So let's not settle for "same ol', same ol'" in proclaiming the Gospel and making new disciples. Let's be open to newness and not confine ourselves to a straightjacket of "We've never done it that way before."

I've been guilty at times of being too aware of what **didn't** work in the past and **imposing** that expectation on present and future. As we near the kick-off of our 100th anniversary celebration I look back and remember the total **lack** of enthusiasm from Council the first 2 times a proposal was made to add columbaria to our cemetery. The idea came up a couple times over maybe 5 years. A few more years passed and the proposal came up a **3rd time**, now presented by Pastor Arnie. I thought I knew what the upshot would be and was shocked when Council unanimously approved the exploration of what it would take to create a memorial garden out of our historic churchyard. Pastor Arnie and Barb Vogel had a vision, and it was the fullness of time for the expansion of our ministry to the grieving. What an important part of our Life Together the Memorial Garden now is! What a reminder of resurrection hope and a source of comfort for those who loved ones' remains are inurned in a niche, interred in the ground, or simply memorialized by an engraved paver. My parents are interred in Gate of Heaven Cemetery way up in East

Hanover, but I walk the path, read the pavers in their memory, see the redbud (which I call “the Lee tree”) and the bench you all donated upon their passing, and I feel “accompanied.”

The longer I’m here and the more things we’ve tried, the more careful I have to be **not** to throw a wet blanket on others’ creative and sizzling ideas by saying, “Yeah, we tried that before....”: because times change and people change and the arrival of “the fullness of time” makes all the difference in the world. God isn’t finished with us yet! It’s so helpful for me to remember that when I think how **staunchly** I stood **against** moving the Sunday School hour from **between** worship services to the same time as the 2nd service. We’ve probably all heard the advice: “Be careful what you ask for!”

One year in First Holy Communion prep I asked the parents, “What would it take to get you into worship? To move you from the parking lot into the sanctuary?” And one of our church friends made the dreaded suggestion, “Pastor Mary, I know you don’t want to do it, but -- move Sunday School to worship time!” It was the fullness of time for that suggestion that had been made many times before. The Holy Spirit helped me see I’d been throwing out the baby with the bath water: as things stood, we didn’t have the children in worship, and we didn’t have the adults either! Now we’re doing our best to enable families to be **together** in worship, by starting Sunday School at 10:15, during coffee hour, and dismissing the children by 11 so they can join their families in the pew, half-way through 10:30 worship, in time to come forward and either receive Holy Communion or a blessing.

For some reason, as I prepared this weekend’s sermon, I kept thinking about the parable of the talents and the guy who took the money he’d been given to invest for somebody else, dug a hole in the ground and hid it. He said he’d done so out of fear that otherwise he’d **lose** the money and then its owner would blame him.... The connection

here is that in both the parable of the talents and the parable of the dishonest manager, **people are entrusted with what belongs to someone else.** We, too, are **entrusted with what belongs to Someone Else: our talents, our life itself, belong to God.** Our spiritual gifts in particular, like art, music, the gift of teaching, the gift of healing, the gift of administration, the gift of prayer, compassion for the needy, the gift of advocacy (lifting up one's voice on behalf of others, using one's own power to help the powerless), the gift of faith itself, deep trust in God's love and faithfulness: these gifts may help us earn a living, but they are given **not just to us personally, but for the sake of the community.** And don't believe for a moment you were standing behind the door when spiritual gifts were given out! **We all have spiritual gifts.** We're part of a puzzle with a kajillion pieces. And one of those pieces looks exactly like you. And without you, the puzzle is not complete and the Kingdom cannot come as fully in this place, at this time, as our Lord desires.

Let us be clever, creative, intelligent, even shrewd, in using our individual and communal gifts, in this place, at this time, the hinge moment between Holy Trinity's first and second hundred years! Let's proclaim the Gospel on this, our watch if necessary, using words, but in all things, living out faith active in love. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham