

September 18, 2022
Luke 16:1-13

Pentecost 15
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Unfaithful Servant”

“You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Every congregation and non-profit organization with which I have worked has a “two signature rule” on all cheques. It helps assure that signing officers are keeping track of expenditures for the organization and helps catch any inadvertent errors that one person might not notice. But the main reason behind this rule is the experience some organizations have had with unscrupulous or dishonest money managers, persons who help themselves to the organization’s funds without other leaders noticing. An example of this happened many years ago in one of the most prominent congregations in the New Jersey Synod. The church had been served for many years by a treasurer who had gained the trust of all its members. He was an accountant who had a reputation for honesty and integrity; many of the members of the congregation trusted him with their personal financial matters. He gave countless hours to the church, prepared detailed reports, and was diligent in paying bills and making payroll. This faithful servant became so trusted that no one thought about instituting a two-signature policy, since there was no reason to question the treasurer’s integrity. What the congregation did not know, however, was that the treasurer had gotten himself into financial difficulties and began “borrowing” small sums of money from the church, vowing to himself that he would pay back what he had borrowed when his financial circumstances got better. But these “better times” never arrived, and soon the small sums of money he “borrowed” became larger and larger, until by the time his activities were discovered more than \$100,000 had been taken from the congregation. It was a moment of crisis for the people of this church who had placed so much trust and confidence in what turned out to be an unfaithful servant; they were able to recover their financial losses through their insurance, but their loss of trust in this individual impacted their ability to trust others who would serve them for a long time.

Jesus’ parable in today’s Gospel lesson centres on a similarly unfaithful servant, one whose fraud is exposed and whose future employment situation is thrown into turmoil. It follows the parable of the Prodigal Son, another person who had squandered what had been entrusted to him. The parable is addressed to Jesus’ disciples, but the Pharisees (whose murmuring had inspired the three previous parables) do not fade from view for long (*“The Pharisees, who were lovers of money,*

heard all this, and they ridiculed him.” – 16:14). The story centres on two figures: a rich man and his steward (“manager” – 16:1). Charges are brought to the rich man that the steward had been “squandering his property” (like the prodigal son “*squandered his property in dissolute living*” – 15:13). Understandably outraged by this act of betrayal, the rich man summoned the steward and said to him “*what is this I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.*” (16:2). The steward had lost the trust of his employer, and when his theft is exposed, he will at the least be fired and at the most imprisoned for squandering what had been entrusted to him.

The steward knows that he is in trouble; his interior speech (like that of the prodigal son’s) is a significant turning point in the story. In distress, the steward considers his options now that his current position is ending. Realizing that “*I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg*” (16:3), he seizes on a course of action that will make him welcome in other people’s homes now that “*my master is taking my position away from me.*” In response to this imminent crisis, the steward calls in the master’s debtors and summarily reduces the debt of each:

- “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.’” – 16:5-7.

The rich man and his debtors were dealing in large commercial interests, not in household quantities. By reducing the amounts of the debts while he is still in the service of the rich man (or at least while the debtors still assume that he is the rich man’s steward), the steward hopes he will gain their favour. He knows that the rich man will not be able to reverse his actions later without losing face with his debtors, and the steward will have acquired a debt of honour and gratitude from each debtor that will ensure goodwill for him in the future.

- “He might have used his position to gain more wealth for his boss in an attempt to reclaim his position or mitigate the damage to his reputation or employment status. But instead, he changes his orientation to his boss’s clients as avenues for his future. His self-preservatory choice to be dishonest benefited not the master but his neighbours.” – Kendra A. Mohn.

We might imagine how the master would have responded when he discovers that he has once again been defrauded by this unfaithful servant. Not only would he fire him immediately, but he would call the police and have him thrown in jail for such an act of depriving the rich man repayment for what he is owed. But surprisingly, the rich man praises the steward for his foresighted, shrewd action, regardless of whether his actions are dishonest or merely restore the accounts to their proper amounts: *“his master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly”* (16:8). He realizes that the debtors are now bound by honour to reciprocate the stewards’ benevolence. The dishonest servant becomes the unlikely hero of the parable, *“for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light,”* a phrase that identifies persons who have seen the kingdom of God dawning in Jesus’ works and in his calls for a radical commitment to God’s power to deliver people from corruption and oppression:

- “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” – John 12:36.
- “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.” – Ephesians 5:8-9.
- “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the light or of darkness.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5.

Jesus is calling on his disciples to be equally “shrewd” (“wise, prudent”) in using their material goods so that when their “unrighteous mammon” fails they will have an eternal home: *“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.”* (16:9). Disciples are not called to make friends of this “unrighteous mammon,” but to use it as a means of fulfilling their mission: *“Through this parable, therefore, Jesus admonishes his hearers to cast caution aside, seize the moment of opportunity, and make provisions for their future before God. The kingdom is at hand.”* (Alan Culpepper).

The unfaithful steward is not presented by Jesus as a role model for congregational financial management; his presence at the centre of this parable may be shocking to us, but Jesus presents him as one who sees the wealth entrusted to him not as an end in itself but as a means to build relationships that will serve both his master and himself. While Jesus’ audience may still be shocked at the unexpected response of the master in the parable, Jesus turns his attention to their role as stewards of all that

our Lord will entrust to them as apostles, proclaiming that *“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.”* (16:10). Faithfulness and honesty are not related solely to wealth and power; one who is faithful over little will be faithful over a large amount. If one has not been faithful over “worldly wealth” (*adikos*), how can that person be trusted with the true wealth that comes only from God: *“If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”* (16:11). If a steward has not been faithful with what belongs to another person, then who will give them their own treasure in heaven, *“an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:4)? Jesus sums up his surprising, disturbing teaching by reminding his audience that they must choose who they will serve, since no servant can serve more than one master:

- “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.” – 16:13.

Wealth, which can serve as a means and opportunity for securing one’s place in the kingdom if used shrewdly for the sake of others, can also become a master. Materialism enslaves us, but God requires exclusive loyalty. One cannot be devoted both to acquiring wealth and to serving God: *“You are to love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”* (Deuteronomy 6:5). The way we use our wealth reveals who we serve: *“The choice of having no master is not an option; we can only choose the Lord we serve.”* (Culpepper). Paul Tillich, a prominent Twentieth Century theologian, defined faith as one’s “ultimate concern – that which demands complete surrender of the person who faithfully accepts the Ultimate.” Whatever is regarded as ultimately important in one’s life is in effect the object or subject of one’s faith.

- “An ultimate concern is in principle an unconditional concern which calls for the allegiance of the whole self – emotionally, volitionally, and intellectually. So conceived, anything could in theory become the object of ultimate concern – whether material, mental, or spiritual in nature ... Faith is not the exclusive characteristic of theists – those who believe in one or more gods or higher realms – but can be seen as well in the lives of those whose ultimate concern is for instance their nation, or a view of history, or a value such as power or success.” – Stanley Grean.

Jesus does not offer details as to the circumstances that led to the dishonest steward being charged with squandering the master's property; but had the wealth he had squandered been his "ultimate concern" he would have endeavored to gather as much of it for himself before his dismissal and possible imprisonment. But the steward looks upon wealth not as an end but as a means for building relationship with others so that "*people may welcome me into their homes.*" (16:4). For disciples of every generation who confess that "*Jesus Christ is Lord,*" wealth and possessions can likewise not be seen as an end in themselves, that in which we place our complete trust and confidence, but as a means through which we fulfill the mission that Christ has set before us. We are called to be faithful stewards of what our Lord has entrusted to us, recognizing that "*all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,*" but we must never confuse the wealth that we are to use according to God's Will with wealth that will supply for us what only God can offer.

- "Christians are to be faithful whether we deal in little things or vast resources. Whether we are as shrewd as the dishonest servant depends on whether we use our material goods, great or small, to help those in need. Then, when we worship God rather than our wealth, we will find that we truly have 'friends in high places.'" – Culpepper.

The parable of the dishonest steward and its attending interpretations say to Jesus' disciples that for all the dangers in possessions, it is possible to manage goods in ways appropriate to life in the kingdom of God. The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem.

- "Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the [king], convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbour's cat. 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.'" – Fred Craddock.

No one in that New Jersey congregation ever discovered what motivated their once-faithful treasurer to betray their trust by stealing such a large sum of the church's finances; but that act of betrayal left scars that took a long time to heal. Anyone in a position of leadership in the church must realize that we are stewards of what belongs to the Lord, and therefore all that belongs to us – "*ourselves, our time, and*

our possessions” – is to be used in according with God’s purposes and to fulfill God’s Will among us. As each of us is “*by nature sinful and unclean,*” we are all vulnerable to become an unfaithful steward, flawed servants who can easily squander that which our Lord has placed in our care. While we need to practice sound financial habits and enact policies such as two-signature rules and fiduciary oversight, we also need to realize that the wealth that is in our trust is meant to serve our Lord - it is *not* our God! Jesus is not calling us to emulate the behaviour of the dishonest steward; he is calling us to see in his example how even such a flawed character can realize that wealth is a means to an end, not an end.

- “The parable does not unmask the dishonest of the master or expose him to ridicule. Instead, the parable turns on the steward’s shrewd response to the urgency of his situation and invites hearers to understand that they are likewise in the midst of a crisis that demands an urgent decision if disaster is to be avoided. Faced with the loss of his position, the dishonest steward acted decisively to provide for his future. One who hears the gospel knows that just such a decisive act is required of those who will stake their all on the coming kingdom of God.” – Culpepper.

A two-signature policy might have spared that congregation from the pain they suffered when they realized that their treasurer was yet another dishonest steward. As a church made up of similarly sinful, flawed human beings, we need to institute safeguards so that we do not become vulnerable to temptations when they are placed before us. We are all as imperfect as the servant in the parable; yet our Lord still calls us to care for the most precious gift of the Gospel, the liberating word of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we use the wealth placed in our trust not as an end but as a means through which this true treasure, the gift of eternal life, might remain our “Ultimate Concern” and the true treasure in which we place our trust and faith.

Amen.