

Being Shrewd in Growing the Community

(Luke 16:1-13)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 22, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning's reading from Luke is a tough one. It's one that I read and then I sit wondering what I'm supposed to do with it. If there's any comfort to me in this – indeed, comfort to anyone struggling with it – it's that we're not alone in feeling that way. Several commentaries to which I referred highlighted the frustration many feel about these verses, with one going so far as to say that "The reader is oftentimes left to struggle for meaning, just as the preacher struggles to interpret. Both end up frustrated."¹

The story seems straightforward enough. We have a rich man who hires a steward, a position in that time that would have essentially been empowered to act on all matters – legal and financial – on behalf of the owner. The owner finds out that the steward has not been acting above board with regard to his property. The steward then learns that the owner knows what he has been up to and he begins to panic. Driven by his fear, he makes plans for his own preservation after the inevitable firing he knows is coming, and he reduces the amount owed by some of the debtors so that they will be inclined to help him later.

And when the owner finds out the steward has been cutting the amount owed on various accounts? He ... **praises** him. As we read, he "commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."²

The steward has acted in a manner detrimental to the owner's finances, not once, but **twice** ... and in the end he is **praised** for it.

Every bit of this seems wrong. It appears **backwards**. Here, Jesus is holding up as a person to emulate "someone whose life is the complete opposite of everything Christ ever taught."³ So what are we to make of all of this? How are we supposed to take this parable – a story of mismanagement and deceit – and apply it to our lives?

In my study on this, I ran across two different, competing views. One, the steward's reduction of the amounts owed by the debtors wasn't in fact reducing what they were supposed to pay to the rich man, but rather eliminating his own commission on the transaction. The owner would have still received all he was owed, while the steward would have taken a short-time cut in

¹ Helen Montgomery Debevoise, "Luke 16:1-13 – Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4*, p. 92.

² Luke 16:8 (NRSV).

³ Debevoise, p. 92.

exchange for long-term security. Second, “he falsified the amounts owed to his master to gain the favor of those who would later offer him hospitality in the time of unemployment.”⁴ So the end result would have been the same – long-term security, but security achieved by cooking the books.

In the first scenario, he would have been the hero: he cut the amount owed by the debtors by eliminating his own commission, but not the total expected by the owner. In the second, it would have been more of a mixed bag: a hero to those in debt, but an anti-hero to the owner – shrewd, but dishonest. So which is it? How do we try and apply **this** story to **our lives**?

This morning, in this sermon, I don’t think we do. I think we look away from that and focus instead on a smaller, but perhaps more powerful idea, that was presented in a book by Tom Wright. Wright, a scholar, professor, and former bishop of the Diocese of Durham in England, wrote this in his little commentary on Luke:

[The parable] has nothing to do with commending sharp practice in business or personal finance. Rather, it advises us to sit light to the extra regulations which we impose on one another, not least in the church, which are over and above the gospel itself. The church passes through turbulent times, and frequently needs to reassess what matters and what doesn’t... What should traditional churches do when faced with their own mortality? Perhaps they should learn to think unconventionally, to be prepared to make new friends across traditional barriers, to throw caution to the winds...⁵

Thinking unconventionally. Perhaps **that** is the message we are to take away from the parable this morning: **thinking unconventionally**. In this case, the shrewdness highlighted by the rich man wasn’t because of the way the steward handled the finances; perhaps it was because he was thinking outside the box in coming up with a solution. But there are two other things that jump out at me: **reassessing what matters** and **crossing traditional barriers**.

Last week I talked briefly about the beginning of stewardship season and that conversations are already underway about what we **can** and **should** do to welcome those who **come to us**, and how we **can** and **should go** out from this place to those in the community. As we have those talks, Wright’s perception of today’s Gospel reading could be invaluable.

Instead of staying inside the box, perhaps we take an unconventional turn **outside the box** and cross the barriers out there – real or perceived. We should have conversations on the things that we’re already doing ... **and** address the fear and apprehension that inevitably arise when we consider doing something new or different.

How, for instance, do we let those who are guests at our pantry know that they are also most welcomed to join us here on Sunday mornings, reassuring them that there are no barriers

⁴ Fred B. Craddock. *Luke* (from the *Interpretation* series), p. 191.

⁵ Tom Wright. *Luke for Everyone*, p. 195.

between Bishop's Chapel and our sanctuary? How do we break down barriers in our communication, moving from a broad marketing-style approach to making ourselves known to a one-on-one style of **personal invitation**? How do we take advantage of our upcoming community meal in Boyce as an opportunity to share our history and our story and encourage people to come experience a bit of it ... to be **inviting** without being **intimidating**?

We definitely must reflect on what matters about this church, this congregation and all that we do here. If we can confidently explain what makes our worship, our learning and our fellowship such wonderful experiences – and if we can do it with the excitement that I see so often among all of you – then **that confidence** and **that excitement** will wash over those with whom we are talking about this place.

Yes, I think we are all called in this case to be like the steward. The rich man – God – doesn't want us to be dishonest with what has been entrusted to us, his stewards. What I do think God is asking of us is to be shrewd ... to be creative ... to be unconventional. It may not be much that we're called to undertake; it could just be one new program or one new way of reaching our neighbors. But remember: it's not about the **quantity** of things we can do, but the **quality** with which we do them.

As the gospel writer has said, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." Let's be shrewd in how we approach the little things, and I have no doubt that much joy will follow.

Amen.