

**Sermon, Trinity 9, 2019,**  
**Immanuel Lutheran Church**  
Gospel, St. Luke 16: 1-13

The traditional name of the parable in our Gospel reading today is “The Dishonest Manager.” But it might be described just as well as, “The Dishonest Steward” It is one of the more difficult parables of Jesus to interpret, because on the surface, it seems as if Jesus is approving the dishonest use of someone else’s money to win friends for oneself, or even that one can buy one’s way into heaven. This isn’t what the parable is saying, as we will see.

It is an intriguing parable. It is like another parable of Jesus, the parable of the unforgiving servant, in which a man owes a gigantic debt to his master, but cannot pay it. In today’s parable the manager, or steward is also in a very bad position with his master, too, concerning money. The steward in our story has mishandled the books, either purposely, or by neglect, or incompetence, or all three, and presumably caused his master to lose money. The master has now found out and demands an accounting from the steward, so he can find out how much money he has lost. And he tells the incompetent, or crooked steward that he can no longer work for him. He’s fired.

Being fired is not a good thing, but the steward should be pretty grateful that the master has graciously not decided to call the authorities and have him thrown in jail or sold into slavery. But the steward, instead of feeling relief, or expressing gratitude to his boss, worries about how he will get by without his cushy job. He’s not strong enough for manual work he says. And he refuses to beg. Even thieves and embezzlers have their dignity. So, what to do? He hatches what he thinks is a very clever plan. Before people can find out that he has been given notice, he meets with some of his master’s creditors. He asks them how much they owe. Not surprisingly, he doesn’t seem to know how much. The first one tells him, “100 measures of oil”, about 875 gallons of olive oil. The steward tells him, write down “50.” He has just cheated his master out of a lot of oil, but made a friend. The steward asks another man, “How much do you owe?” This one owes 100 measures of wheat, about 1,000 bushels. The bad steward tells him to reduce the debt to 80 measures, cheating his master again, but making a friend.

Now here comes a little surprise. The master finds out about being cheated again, and instead of finally having enough, and throwing the scoundrel in jail, instead commends him for his shrewdness. Or could it have been a sarcastic compliment with a bite, like, “Quite the shrewd manager, aren’t we? Cheating me of what’s owed me so you can make friends and not have to beg?”

Then a second, bigger surprise comes. Jesus does not condemn the dishonest steward outright, but exhibits his scheming as an example of how clever “the sons of this world” are with money, cleverer than the “sons of light.” The sons of this world are cleverer in that they think about money more than the sons of light. They have to be. They put all their hope in the power of money. They look to it for all their good. If they are without money, they are miserable. If they have money, they are on top of the world. As Luther explains the first commandment in the Large Catechism, that to which we look for all our good is our true god. Money, or mammon is the true God of the “sons of the world”. Because this life is all they have, they might as well do everything they can make it as comfortable and enjoyable as possible for themselves, even if it involves cheating their master, and their neighbor.

Of course Jesus isn’t endorsing stealing or embezzling, or neglect. But he does praise the wise and careful use of that which has been entrusted to our care, our management, our stewardship, everything that we have received from God, His gifts, which is---everything. First of all--our lives. Also parents, our natural abilities and strengths, both physical and mental. Our health, our talents, our aptitudes, our skills, the opportunities we have been given, in short. We would not have a penny in the bank if God did not give us the ability to work, the skills and strength that we use to earn our

livings, the government and peaceful society that allows us to earn money. All these things God gives us, and can recall them at any time.

We are all stewards, managers of God's gifts while we live here on earth. We are called by God to use our gifts wisely, helping others, our neighbors, which includes our family and friends, our brothers and sisters in the church, and reaching out to our community and nation, and world. Through the wise use of God's gifts we make friends with unrighteous wealth, that is, wealth accumulated in a fallen world. We can make friends with our neighbor, sharing with them from what we have been given to steward, including our wealth-- our money.

It is important to emphasize that we do not buy friends, or bribe God, or earn our way into heaven. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone, not by works, not by the best of our works. We are not saved by works, but by faith. But faith is always accompanied by works.

Christ, the good steward, has opened the gates of heaven for us by His good work, which He finished on the cross. There is nothing for us to do to add to or complete that work of Christ, the once for all sacrifice for the sins of the world. Christ promises that all who believe in Him will walk through the gates of heaven that He has opened by His torn body and shed blood. All who trust in His sacrifice already have forgiveness of their sins, salvation, and eternal life. The riches of heaven and the wealth of the new heavens and the new restored earth at His return are the inheritance of all who look to Jesus for all their good, received by faith. And Jesus has even given us heirs the faith to receive those promises through the gift of His Holy Spirit in our Baptisms. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God, preached and taught, and Christ's Sacraments of Baptism and Communion to create and sustain that faith which trusts the glorious promise that all who believe and are baptized are co-heirs with Christ of the riches of heaven.

We know the happy ending that awaits us believers. We know that after whatever suffering or poverty we may have in this short lifetime, comes eternal joy, eternal riches, unending.

St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, chapter 4 (17)

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Our worldly eyes see our bank statements, our credit card and utility bills. Our worldly eyes see the stock market reports. But these things are transient. They will not last. But the things unseen to worldly eyes, are seen by the sons and daughters of light by faith: the glory and riches and wealth and happiness that awaits the faithful and their loved ones in Christ, their brothers and sisters in the faith, their neighbors in the faith. These things will last, and they will see them in the flesh with their own eyes, in the flesh, on the last day.

Knowing all this, we pray that the Holy Spirit loosen the vise-like grip we have on our money, that we may use it for the benefit of our neighbor and the glory of God. And what greater benefit can our neighbor have than the saving Word of God be purely taught and the Sacraments given rightly in their midst. This is the true food, the true bread from heaven. When we give to God with our weekly offering, we are not paying for a pleasant Sunday morning entertainment, for services rendered, like a business transaction, neither are we paying a retainer, so that we can have a Christian burial, or visits when we are sick. No, we give because we love our neighbor as ourselves. We love those sitting in the pews next to you, in front and behind us, and those who are absent. We want them to have a place in this community of faith where they can receive absolution. We want them to have a family that gathers around the Word and Sacrament, and grows in the knowledge of God's love for them.

We also want our neighbors in this city to have a place where they can hear the Gospel that God wants to give them everything as a free gift, and that God has done everything for their salvation already. He doesn't demand that they make a decision for Him. God Himself has already made the decision, to save them, and the whole world, by sending His Son to die for them. This is the place in this community where that is preached and taught. Here you will receive the blessings of God's eternal decision, forgiveness of sins, salvation, a new heart and a new, eternal, life.

We want our neighbors in this community to have a place where they are taught that they do not need to earn their salvation, for they cannot. A place where they can stop wasting time and energy justifying themselves, and live in God's declaration of righteousness and holiness to them for Christ's sake, by faith.

The Lord doesn't ask you to sell all you have and give it to the poor, as he did once to a rich young man, who had made unrighteous wealth his god. He doesn't ask you to give a specific percentage, although the saints of the Old Testament, who only had the promises of the Messiah were called to give a tenth of what they made. It seems only fitting that the tenth, the tithe, would even more be a worthy goal or floor for giving for those of us who are blessed to live in these last times when Christ has been revealed in the flesh.

You and I are all stewards of the various gifts God has given us. He wants us to have one master, the true Master, the Lord Himself. He has so much more to give us, maybe not material wealth in this lifetime, but the whole world in the life to come. So make friends with God and your neighbor with your wealth, so that when it fails, and it all fails eventually, that your neighbors in Christ with whom you have shared what God has given you may welcome you into the heavenly places, may greet you as you enter the gates of heaven, may walk beside you, thanking you for sharing your gifts with them in this life. In Jesus + name. Amen.