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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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Luke 16:1-13
“Dishonest Wealth?”

It is not a good sign when every bible commentary I consulted before preparing this sermon began with phrases like this: The parable of the Dishonest Manager has long baffled interpreters, puzzled bible scholars; it is difficult to read and difficult to preach. It's a strange little story found only in Luke's gospel in which a manager cheats his boss out of loads of money; who, just before being fired, cuts a deal with people who owed money to his boss so they'll be indebted to him; and then Jesus praises this shyster for his shrewd behavior. He even goes so far as to say, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." Sure, the passage ends with some straightforward moral advice, such as: "You can't serve God and mammon, or in more modern terms, God and wealth." But before we get to those sayings, what is to be done with Luke's baffling, puzzling, difficult parable? Well, first you avoid it by telling another story.

There was once a policeman who found a perfect hiding place for nabbing speeders. Near a bend in the road at the base of a hill, just about everyone going by was speeding. But one day, everyone who passed the policeman was driving below the speed limit. The officer soon located the problem. Farther back up the road, a 10-year old boy was standing holding a huge, hand-painted sign that read "Speed Trap Ahead." A little more investigative work led the officer to find the boy's accomplice – another boy around the curve in the road beyond the speed trap with a sign reading "TIPS" and a bucket at his feet, full of change.

Now, where do our sympathies lie in the little story: with the policeman or with the boys? What they did wasn't the best, and the fact that they profited from their behavior makes it doubly questionable, but the picture of these two entrepreneurs still makes us smile. Jesus told a lot of parables, and not everyone in those stories is a shining star of moral virtue. The story in Luke 11 imagines going to a friend's house at midnight, banging on the door and asking for three loaves of bread. The friend yells down, "Go away; the door's locked and the kids are in bed." But eventually, because of persistence, the friend gives you the bread (11:5-8). Or there's the story about the grumpy judge who neither feared God nor respected people, who refused justice for a widow, but through her persistent demands eventually gave her what she demanded (18:2-5). In both cases Jesus goes on to say, Will not a loving God even more so grant you justice and give what is requested to those in need? None of us is perfect. Thus, there are things we can learn from somewhat shady characters, including the dishonest manager in Luke 16.

This manager was the overseer of a rich man's property. He had full authority regarding crops to be grown, livestock to be sold, and even the ability to make loans to the other landowners in the area. One day he was charged with mismanaging the master's property. The word used here is "squandering," which (by the way) is the same verb

used in the story right before this one to describe how the prodigal son “squandered” the inheritance given to him by his father. It’s not a pretty picture.

Lesson #1: Jesus commends this man for acting shrewdly, for sitting down and using his brain to figure out some way to survive once he was caught for cooking the master’s books. The phrase Jesus uses is this: “The children of this age, (of the secular world), are more shrewd in their dealings than are the children of light, (the people of faith)” (Lk 16:8b). Church folk are too often characterized as people who have uncritically, emotionally accepted the Christian faith, while agnostics and atheists are sometimes admired because their rational minds refuse to accept stories about God, Jesus, and resurrection. I would argue that the opposite is true. Atheists reject Christianity on more of an emotional, gut level, because they can’t stomach the idea that a mystery exists which is beyond the limits of human reason and which involves a God whose actions they cannot neatly categorize or control. Real faith takes a healthy blend of head and heart, intellect and intuition. My favorite Christian poster says this: Jesus died to take away your sins, not your brains. We should use our best mental skills for the service of God’s kingdom, instead of reserving them for office hours and research labs.

In the parable, the dishonest manager called in people who owed his master money and reduced their debts in the official ledgers. Some commentators have tried to whitewash this act by suggesting that the steward had been entitled to a commission when he made those loans in the first place, so he was commended for sacrificing his own profit once he’d been caught mismanaging the accounts. I don’t feel quite as lenient toward this character; I see his actions as further corrupt behavior done simply to save his own skin. But this leads to an important point. Lesson #2: How you handle your property and resources has eternal consequences. Ask the people in New Orleans, who endured the fury of Hurricane Katrina and the folly of the government’s response, whether short-term decisions can have long-term consequences. Ask the residents of the Gulf whether our nation’s addiction to fossil fuels and our blind-eyed permissiveness toward BP’s mishandling of offshore drilling has long-term consequences. Ask African-American families who for generations were manipulated through red-lining to buy on one side of a street but not on the other, whose property ended up being worth a fraction of what a home in the “white part of town” is worth, whether such short-term acts have long-term consequences.

Part of the reason Jesus told this parable was to remind us that we are to use our possessions to gain, not to lose, our own future. We are to act now in the best interests of God’s eternal realm waiting to unfold before us. Think of it this way: What’s the one part of your house or apartment where you open the door, look around, shake your head and say to yourself, “Man, I own a lot of junk.” Is it your basement where you have boxes still unpacked from your last move? Is it your attic, where you can never find anything and which you promise someday you’ll actually clean out? Is it a closet so crammed full that you warn your guests never to open the door? Ask yourself: Did I buy all that stuff for God or for me? Do these things glorify God’s kingdom and serve the goals of my faith, or do they just clutter my house and clog up my life?

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus said quite clearly, “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Lk 12:32-34). There’s a reason that last verse is our Stewardship verse for this year. There’s a reason why, through our Pony Express process and in general, we want people in ELPC to have open conversations about pledging and giving and church life. Our treasures should go where our hearts are, toward the things that last, that heal, that help, and not simply to end up in storage lockers and city landfills. It’s as simple as that.

Lesson #1: Be shrewd and use your best mental skills for the goals of God’s kingdom.
Lesson #2: How you use your financial resources has eternal consequences. And Lesson #3: All wealth, even what Jesus called “dishonest wealth,” can be used either to enslave or to liberate. I have no doubt that the economic system described in Jesus’ parable was designed more to enslave than to liberate. The absentee landowner took the bulk of the profits and employed a manager who was fully indebted to him. In addition, creditors borrowed from the landowner and manager, and were in debt to them in jugs of oil or bushels of wheat. If you can’t pay your bill, you’ll either go to jail or be made a slave. That’s the oppressive model of Jesus’ day.

Sadly, I have no doubt that the current economic system under which we live today is designed more to enslave than to liberate. Does your monthly credit card bill make you feel freer or more burdened? Does the car insurance premium, the rent or mortgage payment, and your health insurance bill (or lack of health coverage) make you feel freer or more enslaved? The top 225 richest people in the world have a collective worth of about \$1 trillion, which is equivalent to the net worth of the 2.5 billion poorest people on earth. I’m sorry, but you cannot make the case that modern economics are fully just, faithful, and life-giving to all God’s children. It is no coincidence that the early Christian church sincerely sought to hold their goods in common, giving to each according to their need. It is no coincidence that the first leaders of the church, deacons like Philip and Stephen, were explicitly instructed to feed the hungry and care for vulnerable widows.

Here’s a simple litmus test offered by Christ. In Luke 14 he said this: *When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or relatives or rich neighbors, in case they invite you in return and repay you. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and blind. You will be blessed, for they cannot repay you, but you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous* (Lk 14:12-14). There is a way to use wealth, personal wealth and national wealth, which does not enslave but rather gives life and sets people free. The savvy manager did it to save his own skin before he lost his job. Shrewd Christians, the faithful stewards that you and I are called to be, can do this same work to save other’s skins, save other’s lives, hopes and spirits. Sometimes it means making real choices and commitments for the sake of long-term, even eternal goals. Often it means just being faithful in little things. And always, always it means choosing to serve God and not mammon, the false gods of wealth and consumption.

That doesn't strike me as being baffling, puzzling or truly difficult. Choose this day to love and serve the Lord God only. And, by grace, all good things for this life and the life to come will follow. Thanks be to God.

AMEN