

## ***THE SURE THING***

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

September 22, 2019; 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Luke 16:1-13

***“No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth.”***

Luke 16:13

Jesus tells more than 40 parables in the New Testament. Some are simple: easy to understand and apply to our lives. A few of them are, frankly, baffling.

I didn't choose the story I just read for you: Jesus' Parable of the Dishonest Manager. It comes up as the recommended lectionary text for this Sunday.

I've found, over my years of ministry, that — as much as one part of me wants to avoid tough biblical texts like this one — it's often worth the effort to forge ahead anyway. Stories like these stretch us. They force us to enter into new and unaccustomed ways of thinking. If we give them a chance, we just may discover something shimmering: a nugget in the bottom of a prospector's pan, after all that river mud has been washed away.

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Many of us have a tendency to think of Jesus' parables as though they were fables. You know, simple stories about some good people, some bad people and a moral at the end: a comforting saying we can take home with us.

You're all familiar with Aesop's Fables: like the Tortoise and the Hare. The

two of them run their race. The hare is overconfident and easily distracted. The tortoise just keeps plugging along in his tortoise way: and he wins! The moral of the story: “Slow and steady wins the race.” A neat little package.

You’d look long and hard, though, to find a simple moral in the Parable of the Unjust Manager. The problem of this story is this: nobody in it seems to be good — nobody! Every single character is looking out for number one. The law of the jungle reigns supreme.

What’s even more astonishing is that Jesus not only seems to consider this normal, but even suggests that his disciples ought to “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.” That’s exactly what he says in verse 9. Could it possibly be true that Jesus is recommending dishonesty?

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Well, let’s dig in. There’s a rich landowner who goes off for many years, leaving one of his senior servants to manage the estate. This, of course, is many centuries before farm machinery. If you were going to run any large agricultural operation, you had to have labor — and lots of it. If you couldn’t have slaves, the next best thing was sharecroppers: poor, agricultural workers who were paid a pittance, and who “owed their soul to the company store,” as the old folk song puts it.

It's a crushing, unjust system. Right in the middle of the whole shameful enterprise sits the estate manager. This man — who, very likely, started out as a field laborer himself — lives in luxury in his master's vacant house. The laborers can see him there, of an evening, as they return from the fields. They glimpse him through the window, bathed in golden light. He's decked out in the finest of clothes. His feet are propped on the table, as he savors a cigar and an after-dinner glass of fine wine.

The manager keeps the books of the whole operation: which means he has the unique opportunity to steal from everyone.

He charges the tenant farmers exorbitant prices for seed and supplies, and when the harvest comes in, he conveniently forgets to record all the profits due his master. Everything he skims off the top goes straight into his pocket.

There does seem to be some justice in the world, though: because the absentee landlord somehow gets wind of the shenanigans back at the farm. He sends a message to his manager: "Get ready to be audited."

The manager knows, as soon as he opens that letter, his goose is cooked. There's no way in the world his years of thievery will go unnoticed — and, there's no way he can return the money he's stolen, because he's spent it all.

So, what's a poor grifter to do, when the long arm of the law seems about to

grab him by the scruff of the neck? He could stay put, and get caught — but, there's no future in that! He could head for the hills with a sack of money over his shoulder, and maybe get away with it — though not too likely; the law would catch up with him eventually, if the bandits didn't get him first. Or, he could choose a third alternative: one that's risky and bold beyond imagining, one that demands every ounce of twisted creativity he's got in him. He could take charge of the assets still under his control, and use them to build himself a fortress of protection.

Here's how he does it. The landowner has entrusted his wealth to his manager, but he's also given him something else to take care of, something even more precious: his good name. What if the manager could find a way to make himself indispensable: so that firing him would make his master look so bad, he'd never do it?

The manager leaves the remaining money — everything he hasn't stolen — right where it is. He concentrates on a far more valuable asset: the account books. He's going to use what's in those books to make a very big wager: the biggest of his entire life. Yet while the wager is big, it's not especially risky. In fact, knowing the landowner as he does, he's reasonably certain this highly unorthodox investment is a sure thing.

Inviting the tenant farmers in one by one, he reviews with each of them their financial condition. “What about you? How much do you owe? A hundred measures of olive oil, you say?” The manager extracts his Mont Blanc fountain pen from his vest pocket. With a triumphant flourish, he draws a line through that figure in the ledger-book. “Make it fifty,” he says, flashing a beneficent smile.

The next farmer admits he owes a hundred measures of wheat. “Did I hear you say a hundred?” asks the manager, with a wink. “The book here says you only owe eighty.” On and on he goes, reducing the debt of each tenant in turn.

He doesn’t forgive *all* their debt — that would be overkill. No, he keeps just enough red ink on the books that the tenant farmers will still be beholden to him. Every last one of them walks away happy — because, with one stroke of the pen, he’s given them more money than they could earn in a dozen years.

“Don’t thank *me*,” says the manager, magnanimously. “Thank our generous landlord, may his name be praised.”

Well, the landlord shows up a short while later, his team of auditors in tow. But they never do get to the account books: because something else is going on: something mighty distracting.

Those tenant farmers — half their debt forgiven — are lining the road, welcoming him like a conquering hero! Is he going to admit to this adoring

multitude that he really is the skinflint they always thought he was? *Not a chance!*

The landowner looks at his manager for a long and very tense moment. The manager doesn't blink; he just stares right back. The landowner shakes his head. A wry smile lifts the corners of his mouth.

“You sly devil!” he replies. “I couldn't have finessed that one better, myself. There's a place for you, young man, in my organization: on the senior management team. See you on Monday. Wear a suit.”

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Well, what are we to make of this strange, strange story — strange, because it comes from the mouth of Jesus, and it sure makes him sound like he's endorsing unethical behavior?

It's true that Jesus displays a sort of grudging admiration for the cleverness of this unscrupulous operator. “The children of this age,” he observes, “are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

It reminds me of that classic remark of Batman or Superman, in the comics, after they've vanquished some super-villain: “If only he could have used his powers for good!”

Jesus grudgingly admires the manager's shrewdness, and his boldness in taking such a huge risk. He never does endorse the man's thieving ways: but he

doesn't exactly go out of his way to condemn that behavior, either. Grifters gotta grift. It's what they do.

Jesus looks out, and sees so many people who are like that unscrupulous manager. They're smart, daring, bold and absolutely committed to achieving their purpose. Then, he looks around at so many of the religious people he knows. They're timid, fearful, hesitant, always second-guessing what they ought to be doing.

“If only you people could have some of the passion, the boldness — the *chutzpah* — of the dishonest managers of this world,” is what he's saying. “If only you did, there's no telling how far God's purposes could be advanced! Claim those powers you've all got within you: but use them for good.”

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There's a story of Henry Ford — inventor of the automobile — that's oddly similar to this parable. I have no idea if this incident really happened: but if it didn't, it should have!

In 1912, Henry Ford did visit Ireland, the home of his ancestors. The story goes that, while he was staying in Cork, a couple trustees of the local hospital paid him a call.

“Mr. Ford, we're building a hospital here in Cork, and we think it would be

a marvelous memorial to your dear departed father — who left his native land for the fair shores of America — if you would make a gift to support this worthy endeavor!”

The great Henry Ford took out his checkbook. He handed over a check for £5,000 on the spot.

The next morning, at breakfast, he opened the local newspaper, and saw the banner headline: “American Millionaire Gives Fifty Thousand to Local Hospital.”

Ford wasted no time in summoning the two hospital trustees. He waved the newspaper in their faces. “What’s the meaning of this?” he demanded.

“Mr. Ford, we apologize. Such a regrettable error! But not to worry: we can fix it. We’ll get the editor to print a retraction in the very next edition, declaring that the great Henry Ford has given not fifty thousand, but five.”

Ford again pulled out his checkbook. He wrote out a check for £45,000, and handed it to them: but he didn’t let go. “I am making this further gift under one condition,” he told them. “You must erect a marble arch at the new hospital entrance, and place upon it a plaque that contains this verse from the Bible: “I was a stranger and you took me in.”

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There is a moral, of sorts, to this baffling parable of Jesus. But it’s not a

very satisfying one. “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.”

Taken out of context, as it often is, that final line can be made to sound like an absolute condemnation of money. But it’s not that. In the context of the parable, its meaning is clear. People like the dishonest manager — and his boss, the landlord, who promotes him rather than punishing him — have chosen to pursue wealth at all costs, even if they have to mortgage their own souls to do it.

Don’t be like them, Jesus is telling the disciples — as well as some wealthy Pharisees who happen to be listening. To paraphrase him: “Your money can buy you great pleasure in life. But there’s one thing it can never buy: your salvation. The price of your salvation cannot be calculated in silver drachmas. The only currency that will buy it is your love for God, and your love of neighbor, lived out in meaningful ways.”

We would of course say — from the standpoint of what happens later in the Gospels — that the price of our salvation is Jesus’ offering of himself upon the cross. Part of our acceptance of that wondrous gift is that we commit to offering something in return: our time, our talent, and — yes — even our treasure, to do his work in the world.

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There's a homely old fable about a one-dollar bill and a twenty. that meet each other in the teller's drawer at the bank. "Where ya been?" says Washington to Jackson.

"Oh, I've been to places you've never dreamed of," says the head of Andrew Jackson. "Fancy restaurants, casinos, shopping malls -- every week brings something different. How about you?"

"Oh, my life isn't nearly so exciting as yours," admits Washington's head, dejectedly. "Every week it's the same old thing: church, church, church!"

Why is it that the work of God so often takes second place — not only in terms of money, but also in terms of time? As hard as the children of light work and as generously as they give, there always seem to be "children of this age" who are working harder and contributing more — but not to the work of Christ. They offer up their own sacrifice on the altar of greed and self-interest.

Neither you nor I can serve both God and wealth. The more we can find ways to use what wealth God has given us — our time, our talents, our treasure — to serve the Lord by serving others, the more blessed we will be with joy, in this life and the next.

It's a sure thing!

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As we sing our next hymn, I invite you to follow the lead of the hymn-writer and ask yourself: “What is the world like when Christians follow the Lord with boldness?”

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