

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20C), September 22, 2019

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Grace and Shrewdness

Luke 16:1–15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

From the Parable of the Dishonest Manager in the Gospel of Luke: THE MANAGER SAID TO HIMSELF, “WHAT SHALL I DO, SINCE MY MASTER IS TAKING THE MANAGEMENT AWAY FROM ME? I’M NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO DIG, AND I’M ASHAMED TO BEG. I’VE DECIDED WHAT TO DO, SO THAT WHEN I’M REMOVED FROM MANAGEMENT, PEOPLE MAY RECEIVE ME INTO THEIR HOUSES.” Then, after marking down the bills of those who owed his master, THE MASTER COMMENDED THE DISHONEST MANAGER FOR HIS SHREWDNESS” (vv 3–4, 8).

This may be the most challenging parable Jesus ever told. It seems like it’s all about lying and cheating and stealing, but it’s not. It’s actually about grace. Just when the dishonest manager thinks he’s found his own way out of his crisis, he runs into grace—unexpected and undeserved grace.

But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves.

I.

This isn’t a parable about the kingdom of heaven. It’s a parable set firmly in this fallen world. And in this fallen world there *is* lying and cheating and stealing. And the boss, the rich man, gets wind of it. Sooner or later everything comes to light. The boss discovers that the manager has been playing fast and loose with his stuff. He’s supposed to be managing the owner’s POSSESSIONS, but instead he’s been WASTING them (v 1), and now he’s in some serious hot water. Get down to the corner office immediately. And then it’s as bad as he expects: “You’re done. Fired. Outta here. TURN over the books. YOU’RE NO LONGER MANAGER. Collect your stuff and hit the road” (v 2). It all happens so fast.

And then comes a brief pause. It’s like he’s in the eye of a hurricane. This moment when everything around him freezes and the manager’s left to see himself and his situation for what it truly is. In this personal crisis, before he takes his next step, he reflects. He has a dialogue with himself. He needs to figure out what to do. His next move is critical.

He says TO HIMSELF, “What to do? What to do . . . SINCE MY MASTER IS TAKING THE MANAGEMENT AWAY FROM ME? I’M NOT STRONG ENOUGH TO DIG, AND I’M too ASHAMED TO BEG. C’mon, think. Think. Ah! Yes! That’s it! I’ve got it! Then, WHEN THE MANAGEMENT IS TAKEN AWAY FROM ME, PEOPLE WILL HELP ME OUT AND TAKE ME IN” (vv 3–4).

In this, he’s a bit like the prodigal son. Both were in crisis mode after hitting bottom. Maybe you can relate. Maybe you’ve had that moment when the fig leaf falls off and you find yourself standing there naked and ashamed and trying desperately to figure out where to run for cover. That doesn’t happen very often. It may be a death, or cancer, or a divorce, or a job loss, or bottoming out because of alcohol or drug abuse or porn use. You’re on the verge of losing something precious, if you haven’t already. You’re forced to be honest about yourself, honest about your situation, and try to find some way to make it through. In the manager’s case, he didn’t come to his senses on his own. He thought he was doing just fine until the pink slip hit him in the head.

What to do? Oh, what to do?

And this is what he does. Before he turns in his keys, He does some big favors for the clients. He’s breaking bad. What has he got to lose? He cuts their bills in half. Gives ‘em a special discount. He lies, cheats, and steals to win friends and influence people. He’s being gracious—giving them a generous gift—and banking on that grace to be there when he needs it. Now they’ll have to take him in when he’s out on the street. He’s worked out his moves. That’s his plan to make it through. What’s yours? What are you banking on to get you through life crises? What moves have you planned out to cover yourself?

But it doesn’t end the way we expect. We expect the manager to knock on the door of one of those clients and find a warm welcome. For the favor he did to be returned. For the “I-scratch-your-back-and-you-scratch-mine” deal to pay off. Instead, it ends back where it began—with the boss. Not with the boss suing him or screaming at him, but with the boss commending him. That’s strange. Praising him for HIS SHREWDNESS (v 8). That’s unexpected. That’s undeserved. That’s some grace. He didn’t set out to impress his boss. He wasn’t banking on his moves being received well back at the office. He was simply taking the resources at his disposal and being shrewd with them. Putting them to use.

II.

So, what’s the point? The point *isn’t* to lie, cheat, or steal our way out of crises. It *isn’t* that we should look for a way to impress the Boss, the One who owns everything. And

it *isn't* that we take whatever resources we can get our hands on and use them to serve ourselves. That's how the world does things.

Jesus says, "THE SONS OF THIS WORLD ARE MORE SHREWD IN DEALING WITH THEIR OWN GENERATION THAN THE SONS OF LIGHT" (v 8).

Friends, we are in the world, but we are not OF THE WORLD (Jn 17:16). Not SONS OF THIS WORLD but SONS OF LIGHT. We are children of the day. We belong to the endless world to come.

And what does this mean?

First, it means that repentance is a daily thing. Don't just go with the flow until your sin catches up with you or someone finds you out. Don't get used to lying, cheating, and stealing. Don't tolerate sin in yourself. Don't hope that it'll stay hidden. It won't. GOD KNOWS YOUR HEARTS (v 15). There's no pretending with Him. No faking your way through it. Confess every day. We don't have to wait for our lives to bottom out like the manager did. We know that our lives would be lost if left to ourselves. That's why we roll out of bed in the morning, make the sign of the cross, and say "Glory be to the Father." It's why we finish the day by saying the Lord's Prayer. We live not in crisis repentance but in daily repentance.

Second, it also means that plotting out our moves and hoping for the best isn't the answer. The manager's scheme didn't work the way he expected. We don't need to use earthly possessions to win friends and influence people so that we've got our backs covered and help in our corner. Think *beyond* this life. Think of the life of the world to come, a life that's secure not because of how shrewd you are but how gracious God is.

Third, because our schemes are ultimately useless, it means that there's a grace greater and richer than we expect or deserve. It's the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. If anyone could be accused of squandering riches, it's Him. He squandered the blessings of God on tax collectors and sinners. He's doing it now, for you and me, giving His body and His blood. He even prayed for those who put Him on the cross: "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM." He died for the shrewd and the not so shrewd. His grace is free and full and present for you today. We don't have to bank on ourselves and our shrewdness but on His death for us.

Now Jesus isn't telling us to do what the world does. He isn't telling us to take whatever resources we can get our hands on and use them to serve ourselves.

No matter what crises we've been through or are going through now, no matter what sins have made a mess of our lives, the future doesn't depend on our moves. He already made the final move. From cross to grave to heaven's throne. He says, "IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE ARE MANY ROOMS." He assures us, "I GO TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU." He promises, "I'LL COME AGAIN AND TAKE YOU TO MYSELF, THAT WHERE I AM YOU MAY BE ALSO" (Jn 14:2–3). He says, "YOU ARE MY FRIENDS" (Jn 15:14)—friends because you know what He's doing and how much He loves you.

And because you know what the Master is doing and His love, you can imitate the dishonest manager in this particular way: You can make shrewd use of the things of this world.

Don't imitate his sin, but do imitate his shrewdness. Take the resources put into your hands and use them for more than earthly gain. Put them to eternal use. Serve Christ and the Gospel with the things of this earth. "I TELL YOU," Jesus says, "MAKE FRIENDS FOR YOURSELVES BY MEANS OF UNRIGHTEOUS WEALTH, SO THAT WHEN IT FAILS THEY MAY RECEIVE YOU INTO THE ETERNAL DWELLINGS" (v 9).

Earthly wealth and possessions will fail us. Earthly positions and influence will end. You can't take any of it with you. But you *can* be shrewd with what you've been given. You can use earthly things for the sake of the heavenly kingdom. You can put it all to use with an eye to THE ETERNAL DWELLINGS—and to the souls who will dwell in them. For THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD IS WITH MAN and HE WILL DWELL WITH THEM, AND THEY WILL BE HIS PEOPLE, AND GOD HIMSELF WILL BE WITH THEM AS THEIR GOD (Rev 21:3).

That's where we'll be received when all this is over. And there we'll find so many friends, so many others who've heard of Jesus and believed the good news with us. Those who through us have come to know the riches of His grace, mercy, and love for us.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7