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*Luke 16:1-13*

### The Heritage of First Church

Of all the parables of Jesus this one about the dishonest manager may be among the most difficult of all to comprehend. Especially in this day of world wide economic collapse and all the subsequent suffering from it, commonly understood to have been caused by various combinations of bending the rules out of greed and selfishness on the part of lenders, investors, and borrowers alike, whatever more economically sophisticated understandings of its cause might be; in this day of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and the size of the middle class shrinking, of twenty to twenty five per cent of our nation's children living in poverty, of layoffs of hourly employees and million dollar executive bonuses occurring during the same year in the same corporations, what are we to make today of Jesus' commendation of a dishonest manager who cheated his boss? Whatever was Jesus thinking when he told it?! Well, what indeed?

There may be a hint of its meaning found in its wider context in Luke's gospel. Concern about how money and its management can be an impediment to joy and happiness is a frequent topic in Luke. A few chapters after this parable Luke includes the story of Jesus telling the wealthy young man who asks how he might inherit eternal life to give all his money to the poor. Jesus goes on to say how hard it is for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God. (Luke 18:18-25) Luke includes the story of the man who built bigger and bigger barns in which to store all his wealth but who was called a fool because his life was suddenly ended one day and what would he have to recommend him for heaven? (Luke 12:13-21) Luke tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man in hell and Lazarus in heaven and the rich man asking God if Lazarus could just dip his finger in some water and put it on the rich man's tongue, but God said no, because there was an unbridgeable gulf between the rich man and Lazarus. (Luke 16:19-31) What we do with what we have is one of the most important issues of our lives for Luke, but still, we might then wonder, why would he include this story in his gospel of commendation for a dishonest business manager?

Luke's emphasis upon generosity and seeking first the kingdom of God, upon the responsibility that money and possessions bring, may suggest his understanding that, like it or not, we are all part in the broader economy. There really are few exceptions to this. Consider even the Amish, who have created enclaves of their particular simplified culture of no cars or electricity or fashionable clothes. Yet they are known in Lancaster County,

Pennsylvania as the shrewdest of business people. They know the going value of the crops they raise and the meat they sell, what it costs to produce them the Amish way, and the quality of produce that buyers want. Growing up in Allentown, there was always on Friday night the farmer's market in the fairgrounds pavilion to which my father liked to go and as a boy to which I would often be taken along. My father always liked to visit the vegetables and meats at the Amish stands because he said those were often the freshest and best quality at the most reasonable prices. Amish communities may not be completely recession proof but they seem not to be quite as vulnerable to economic downturns as many of the rest of us. They are mostly self-employed small business people of merchandise which is always needed. They are careful of getting into debt and their expenses are minimal. In this one way at least they may be an example to us all. To use Jesus' terminology, they are children of the light but they are shrewd in dealing with worldly wealth.

Because we know our Lord from all of his other teaching we can be sure that Jesus did not think it was a good thing to be dishonest and to cheat anyone, and the manager is really not commended for his dishonesty, he is commended for his shrewdness. Verses 8 and 9 read, *And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into eternal homes.* In other words, give wealth away to people in need, and when the time comes in the place where the economy is organized around completely different principles you will have those people to recommend you. Maybe Jesus would say that if you don't have a heart than at least use your head. Jesus was not opposed to shrewdness, he recommended it. At another time he said to the disciples that they must be harmless as doves but wise as serpents. (Matthew 10:13)

Well, we are not dishonest managers on the one hand, nor are we the Amish. But we are in the world and until we are called away from the world it is here that we must stay and live successfully, both economically and spiritually. So let us be shrewd in the world and constant in our faith. That's the thing, isn't it; shrewd in the world and constant in our faith?

This morning we celebrate this wonderful old building. For one hundred and seventy five years this edifice absorbed the vibrations of praises and songs and anthems and sermons and prayers. What stories these walls might tell if as in some science fiction wonderland we had the technology to play it all back. We love this building and it is so worldly, a very worldly place where otherworldly things happen. It takes money to paint it and repair it and heat it and clean it. It is so worldly and we are so worldly and that's why we love it and that is why we need it, and that is why, God help us, we need to be shrewd about it. Just ask the Trustees. How they struggled over the years to be clever about it and how they struggle to be clever about it today. If ever we needed to be smart

about this building we need to be so today. It was originally built for a much larger congregation. For a generation we have not seen its pews full. We might feel like the remnant of old in Israel. We don't need to rebuild this temple but we need to maintain it and we are so fewer in number than when it was first constructed. So we need to be shrewd. We need to get the most out of every dollar we put into it. We need to do all that we can for it with our own hands, and we need always to consider to those who will be here after us and love this old building too, for it is part of the heritage given to us as is the faith itself. And we might wish that we did not need to take care of it all, that we could just receive the structure like a gift that never fades. But nothing lasts forever in this world so we need to be shrewd about this building and God will help us because it is a good thing to be shrewd. It is a requirement of being in the world.

Yet the building is not the end. That's the point. That's the point we need always to preserve. The building is not the end. The building is a good means, but not the end. The end is to enter the eternal homes of faith and hope and love, beginning now and into forever.

Jesus was a realist, his message was never of escape from the world but the way to live well within it, how to enjoy its pleasures without being seduced by them into thinking they are all that there is. To borrow some language from the artist Madonna, we are not all material girls but we are all material people and that's a good thing, because after everything material was created God pronounced it good.

Perhaps rather than being sometimes annoyed by the demands of what might be called the business of our faith, we consider it an honor to be entrusted with it. It is an inevitable part of being the church in the world and thus God will help us meet the responsibility. So let us be shrewd about it, as were those who first set the giant rough hewn beams in place and tolled the bell for the first time calling to worship all whose hearts had been touched by the heart of God to gather in this one place, ever since a holy place, because here all are welcome, the poor and the wealthy, the strong and the weak, those for whom life is going smoothly and those for whom it is a daily grind. In this one holy place for 175 years people otherwise different in many ways have gathered as brothers and sisters equally dependent upon the goodness and mercy of God for faith and hope and love, for happiness and joy. It is up to us now, to use our heads guided by our hearts and keep it all going. What a privilege to take our turn, and how highly God must regard us to think we can do it.