

STREET SMART SPIRITUALITY

LUKE 16:1-13

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One week before we launch our Stewardship Campaign, Luke is talking about what to do with wealth. In fact, almost as if it was planned, our lectionary has selections this week and next that deal with possessions.

Luke makes clear in these stories that how we handle our possessions has eternal consequences. Your 401k, 403b, your IRA, bank account, credit cards, club memberships, real estate, art, book or stamp collections – anything material that is on your radar affects the condition of your soul now and forever.

The Buddha, like Jesus, was well aware of the danger to the soul which lies coiled in the possession of things. His solution was simple: divest. But Jesus offers a different tack.

Jesus' goal as he traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem was to prepare his disciples for his arrest, trial, and execution and then to prepare them for life after he was gone.

It is not surprising, therefore, that much of his teaching, indeed the most popular theme of his teaching has to do with money and material things.

We meet the issues of wealth and poverty in Luke with the frequency of a great refrain. Luke uses every opportunity to put this subject before us.

The song of Mary; the sermons of John the Baptist; the parable of the rich fool; the warnings about anxiety; the advice to guests and hosts; and now the parables of chapter 16 this week and next.

I'd like to begin a conversation today about money and spirituality that will extend through the fall as we wrestle with the important question, "how much should I give."

As our congregational giving goes up and our use of invested funds goes down we are entering what one wise member of this congregation said would be the time when we would have to roll up our sleeves. When it comes to having a stewardship-driven budget, he said, we have our work cut out for us. But with enough hard work, teamwork, and faith anything is possible.

As a pastor of this congregation I think of those words of that church member often – especially when we talk about things like big, hairy, audacious mission goals or taking care of this exquisite, historically significant building, yet equipping it for ministry in the 21st century.

Frankly, when I first read today's parable I started looking for an escape route. Biblical commentators have been baffled by Luke's parable of the dishonest steward ever since they started expounding on it.

The problem is Jesus commends a person who has acted dishonestly. But not just that, he also rewards shrewdness as a spiritual virtue.

Every good, upstanding parent, teacher, preacher, and community leader ought to be offended by this parable. Right?

But once I was this far into the parable I was hooked. As much as I was put-off by the dishonest manager doing his best to avoid the worst I was also drawn in by his master's magnanimous treatment of this former employee.

Part of me identifies with this unsavory character. If grace was possible for him, if he could be found worthy in the eyes of his master, then maybe my worst, my unsavory character that surfaces now and then could be redeemed as well.

In other words maybe this parable isn't for folks who don't need absolution, folks who are good and worthy already. Maybe this story Jesus tells is for the rest of us.

We are called to take care of God's world and to know that our lives belong to God. I know that but I don't always live like I know that. I am quite capable of living strictly for myself. It's what Madison Avenue and Hollywood count on in all of us.

My list of sins? I've been known to fawn after VIPs. Pre-occupy myself with having enough money to live the way I want to live; complain when my entree at a restaurant is smaller than that of a family member; sloth away an occasional day at the office; let my competitive juices keep score on someone who has wronged me; let my eye wander at the sexy and titillating; buy something everyone else has just to have it myself. All of which, you may remember the church once called the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, sloth, and anger.

Prayer? Reflecting on God's word? Serving the poor? I'm not so bad at leaving "undone those things I ought to have done" either. I am a steward, who has squandered my master's gifts.¹

The wonderful message of this parable is that it tells us that maybe, just maybe our God understands. Understands that when it comes to living like Jesus we can most of us be artful dodgers and back-sliders. Understands that more of us than not will take the double-fudge chocolate brownie with ice cream rather than the fruit cup for dessert.

What this perplexing little story of Jesus does is it opens up a whole other way of approaching the life God wants us to live. Not aspiring to be Mother Teresa one Sunday giving up our worldly goods, moving to Calcutta and devoting the rest of our days to serving the poor then wondering the next what that was all about.

Just because most of us aren't cut out for such spiritual heroics does not mean we cannot make a difference or affect some lives. But somewhere we have to get the sobering message like that dishonest steward that squandering God's gifts can get you and me fired not by Trump but God.

You can imagine some scenarios. Your marriage is a mess – so you engage in a last minute fire-sale of your own. You try to save a desperate situation.

Millard Fuller comes to mind, founder of Habitat for Humanity. Back in the 1960s in his thirties, making a million a year his wife said she'd had enough and wanted out. So Fuller packed his family into the Lincoln to get away and regroup.

After a few days of conversation he wanted out of the old life too. He then founded an organization that helped instead of milked people. Thirty years later millions who couldn't afford a decent home are now homeowners thanks to Fuller's street-smart attempt to save his life and marriage.

Or maybe something a little less grand. Take a member of the family who drinks too much, who has leaned on everyone close to him, has lied and deceived and manipulated so often that his own behavior finally stops him in his tracks.

He sees in the debris of relationships around him the broken promises and hearts, the silent and resentful looks on the faces of those he loves most.

Without his usual charm and finesse he starts taking a different tack. Stops drinking for one day. Goes to his first AA meeting. Admits he's powerless over alcohol. Looks to his higher power for help. Starts making amends with those he has hurt and offended and betrayed. A hint of life breathes hope. The last minute, street smart effort to salvage his life works.

Or a teenager who surrounds himself with emotional armor finds himself being arraigned one day in city court for shoplifting. The district attorney lays out one scenario – keep going down this path and your life is headed for a train wreck.

So right there in court, waiting to stand before the judge something in him gives. Something lets go and he sees for the first time in a long time kindness and concern in the eyes of the people around him.

At home and school next day the same thing. The hungry beast of anger and fear isn't inside him like usual. Instead of people judging or hassling him he sees that people seem to actually care about him. He smiles at a teacher. Makes eye contact with a peer. Says thank you when a classmate shares some information. Starts building bridges back to the world.

You wonder what would happen if more of us woke up, came to our senses and started a little street wise scrambling of our own. If we could have the gift of seeing where our actions were leading, what the consequences of our mismanagement of God's resources would be, this world might just take a dramatic step in the right direction.

Like I said most of us won't follow in Mother Teresa's footsteps to the streets of Calcutta. Nor will we sell all we have and give it to the poor like St. Francis of Assisi. But, in the spirit of Jesus' parable, I'll bet we could do better. I'll bet we could forgive a few debts, dole out some funds, and spread around what we have.

Buy some school supplies, for example, for our ENERGY kids. Support that neighbor who is volunteering to raise funds another year for the March of Dimes. Take another look at our church pledge when it comes in the mail this year. What the story suggests today is that God may not be so furious at our feeble attempts to follow Jesus as he is content to watch our progress – like a kid learning to play a musical instrument. There are no bad songs. The parent looks for improvement not perfection.

I don't mean to downplay or dodge the fact that most of us here this morning are sometimes, like that steward, dishonest and unfaithful. But what is so awesome about being a child of God is that God can turn around even our worst violations of what is right and good.

Jesus was never interested in squeaky clean. He said, like a physician, he didn't come to be with the well but the sick. He prefers hanging with wayward salesmen or bet-hedging truck drivers rather than United Way citizens of the year.

Friday night some faithful members of our congregation along with Doug and Marta King and Carol and me attended a dinner at Epiphany Church of Christ on Genesee St. – an unsavory neighborhood if ever there was one in Buffalo.

A bunch of clergy were there with family and friends to be recognized by a ten year old organization sponsoring the evening called Jesus the Liberator Seminary. JLS as it is called runs an outreach program to over 300 prisons nation wide.

There is nothing sophisticated about Jesus the Liberator Seminary. The cost of this dinner-fund raiser was a pittance; no one thought to invite the media; the speeches were way too long and the worship service was not the best-planned worship service I've ever attended.

But everyone connected to that project was a dishonest steward who'd seen the light. The leader of the seminary, his wife; the so-called dean of the school – himself a recovering addict; board members, whose lives had skidded out of control before they got back on track. One alum was even there who sang beautifully the old gospel tune, "It Is Well With My Soul" and told us how he started life in an abusive home in Buffalo's projects.

Talk about street smart spirituality. We were serenaded by the Paradise International Recovery Gospel Choir – four women who talked, then sang about getting the message that their lives were spinning toward disaster then using their street smarts to make some shrewd changes and salvage what they had left.

I think God was really pleased with that gathering Friday night – not because there were any models of piety and perfection in the room but because some of his children who he'd nearly given up for lost, were there singing his praises.

You see, ultimately this is a parable about stewardship. We aren't saints either. But maybe you and I can make the best of a bad situation at home or school or work by exercising a little of our own shrewdness and calculation.

Maybe we can start to turn things around before it's too late by using the time, talent and treasure we have to keep ourselves in someone's good graces and on the right side of God. Amen.

ⁱ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol 32, no. 3, year c, July through September