

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Luke 16:1-13

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Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is that that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ 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 yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in very little also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth who will entrust to you the true riches. And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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.

This reading from Luke about the shrewd manager must be one of the strangest passages in all of scripture. There are many other texts whose meanings are disputed or with which we may not agree. However, there are not many texts that have the power to leave us as confused and confounded as does this one. And at no time did I struggle more with this text than I did three years ago when I was preparing to preach here. Most of you thought I was pulpit supply, but those on the Search Committee knew that I was here as a candidate for the position of being your minister. There was a lot of pressure on that sermon because I really, really wanted this job. I was concerned that the Gospel passage for that day was so confusing and frustrating. And it was my confusion and frustration around the passage that nearly cost me this job. As I stood at the door that day shaking hands one woman graciously took my hand but then said, “I didn’t agree with a word you said.” Later I was to learn that when I finished the sermon someone turned around to Dave Williams, who was the chair of the search committee, and said, “Whatever you do, don’t hire her!”

So what did I say that was so offensive? Well, I said that if the church operated more like the mafia does we’d be more effective in our outreach and I told the story of a friend of mine who stole a dog. Now, in retrospect I can see where the whole mob thing was a bit over the top—at the time I was just trying to point out that the mafia is very well-organized and that if the church universal were as well-organized we’d be able to get so much more done. I now realize that it may have been more effective to use the example of a very well managed and successful Fortune 500 company instead of a bunch of thugs with guns. I’ll give my critics that. And the stolen dog thing. In the stolen dog case, my friend was on a mission trip and next door to their work site there was a dog chained outside who wasn’t fed or walked or played with the entire week they were there. And so, as they left the work site for the last time, Todd took the dog, went directly to a vet to have him de-wormed, immunized, and groomed. He then brought him home to Grand Rapids where Lucky, an aptly named critter, now enjoys life with two folks who love him dearly, care for him responsibly, and treasure having him in their lives. It seems to me the perfect example of an instance when doing what was unlawful was the right thing to do, just as in this parable of the wise steward. However, I can see where things could run amuck if every time someone thought someone else’s dog or cat or even child was being mistreated, he or she would just take possession of it. Indeed, if this were the case I’d likely be bringing home at least one child with

me every time I go to Meijer because I so often find myself appalled by the ways some parents are neglectful—if not down right abusive—of their children. So, in retrospect, I guess Todd should of called the Humane Society or something like that instead of just stealing the dog. But in another way I also think that, in his case, the ends justified the means.

And that idea—that the end justifies the means—is a principle that is at play in this morning’s parable of the shrewd steward. Here’s how the incident unfolds.

There’s a guy who owns a restaurant in Traverse City. A few months ago, when the business started turning a profit, he hired a manager to help with the day to day details of running the place. Come to find out, the manager has been stealing money a little bit at a time—sometimes from the waitstaff’s tip jars, sometimes from the register, and sometimes right out of the safe in the owner’s office. When the restaurant owner finds out about the stealing, he’s ticked. He tells the manager to finish the shift but that’s it—as of midnight, he’s out of a job. When the owner leaves for the evening, the manager puts a big sign in the front window that reads—“Free Dessert with Every Entrée.” The manager then proceeds to give away every last piece of pie, slice of cake, and scoop of ice cream in the restaurant. When the owner returns to the restaurant the next morning he’s surprised to see an empty dessert case. But he’s even more surprised when he looks at the previous night’s receipts on his desk and discovers that sales were \$3000 more than the previous one day record. He asks the sous chef what happened. The chef tells him about the manager’s free desserts. The restaurant owner picks up the phone, calls the manager, commends him for his brilliant marketing, gives him his job back, and offers him a raise. Apparently, to the restaurant owner, the manager’s dishonest dealings with the free desserts justified the substantial increase in profit. And Jesus said, “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 within this statement lies the thrust of Jesus’ argument—if only the children of light—the believers, his followers, us—were as shrewd and crafty as the children of this age. Here being a child of this age is not a good thing. A child of this age uses shrewdness, craftiness, skill, resources, and know how to pursue the things that are important to the people of this age—money, cars, prestige, popularity, success, square footage of a house, degrees, beauty, thinness, youth—you know, all of the things we’re constantly being pressured and expected to pursue. But in the concluding sentence of this text, Jesus leaves no doubt about what happens when we use our gifts to pursue the things of this world. “You cannot serve God and wealth.” In other words, you gotta choose—are you going to use your God given gifts and abilities to pursue the good things of this life or are you going to use your God given gifts and abilities to pursue the things of a godly life—are you going to use what you have in order to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and all your soul and all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself or are you going to be like so many others who take what’s best for themselves and give what’s left to God. Because, according to scripture, that ain’t gonna work. God wants our very best for God’s own self. God doesn’t want to be the runner up. God demands first place in our lives and it is we who, though we’re living large as children of this age, when it comes time to be the children of light, we are the ones who will suffer for giving God what was left, not what was best.

I knew I wanted to be a minister when I was fifteen years old. I felt God’s call to be a minister as surely as I felt the pressure of the mouth piece from my French horn pressing against my lips during band class. I pursued this goal through high school and then college. And I’ll never forget a time when I was home from college during my junior year and my grandpa asked if I was still wanting to

be a minister. I enthusiastically replied that I had joined the Preseminary Fellowship at the campus ministry center and that I had begun learning about seminaries I might attend. I thought that as a lifelong Methodist and church volunteer he would welcome my reply with great enthusiasm and affirmation. Instead he said, “What a waste of a good brain.”

And sadly his comments are reflective of how so many in society and the church feel about the church—give the world your best, give God what’s left. Give the world your honor students who have the ability to become doctors, lawyers, and great business folks—give the church whoever is mediocre and can’t make it in the real world. Another example of this mindset comes from the years that I served as an associate minister in Rhode Island. It was time for our yearly salary review and the senior minister of the church wasn’t being paid according to conference guidelines. He requested a raise that would be competitive for someone with his education and fifteen experience. Someone on the finance committee replied, “You choose to be poor when you choose to be a minister.” People in that church gave, on average, gave less than one percent of their incomes to the church and yet they had lovely homes on the water, huge SUVs, sent their children to private schools, and belonged to the country club whose dues were over \$15,000 a year. And yet they claimed they couldn’t afford to raise his salary to the point at which he could pay the bills, send his boys to college, and have a little left over for savings. Give the world your best—give to the car dealers, the real estate agents, the fancy schools, the country club, give God what’s left.

So we’ve seen what the life of the children of this age looks like—it is fraught with competition, material goods, vanity, insecurity and self-indulgence. Now it is our job to determine what the world of the children of light looks like. It is our job to consider what is our very best and then find a way to offer that to God. At this point it’s up to us to choose—it’s up to us to decide if we will be a child of this age or a child of the light because Jesus makes it perfectly clear that we cannot be both—we cannot serve both God and money. My prayer for us today is that we will use our wealth—whether it be material or spiritual—as a tool, as a means of sharing the good news of Christ’s salvation with all the world. For when we do so, we’ll know that salvation means we don’t have to keep up with the Joneses, be a size 6, drive a fancy car, or live on the right side of the tracks. Salvation means we are free of the pressures and expectations of this world, free to truly live as children of light who love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds and love our neighbors as ourselves—then and only then we can live as folks free to give God the best and the world the rest.