

## Shrewd Stewardship

Firelands Presbyterian Church      Sept. 19, 2010

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1    Psalm 79:1-9    1 Timothy 2:1-7    Luke 16:1-13

There once was a man who worked at a factory. He worked at this factory for 30 years. And about 20 years into his time there, the owners of the factory decided that the workers were stealing things, so they set up guards at the gate to check all the workers every day as they left.

And every evening for those 10 years, five nights a week, this guy walked through those gates, trundling his wheelbarrow, and the guards could see, every evening, that the wheelbarrow was empty. They checked his pockets and all. They were sure that this guy wasn't stealing anything.

Finally he retired, and the next week one of his co-workers commented as he left the factory, "Well, we'll see a lot less theft now that *he's* gone."

"Why? What was he stealing?" the guard demanded.

The co-worker grinned: "Wheelbarrows."

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We laugh, don't we? Ah, he pulled one over on the bosses. The Little Guy wins!

As a story, it's great, but if we were on the jury at his trial, we'd probably be quick to convict him.

I think we respond the same way to this parable. A manager—or steward—is accused by the rich man he works for of stealing and told to bring in the books. He's going to be fired. He panics—how will he live, without a job? He's too weak to do manual labor and too proud to beg. Ah! He gets an idea. He calls in his master's debtors and slashes the amounts they owe, knowing that they'll be so grateful to him that they'll welcome him into their homes.

Don't we respond negatively to that story? Sure, he pulled one over, but gee, that's just *wrong!* He cheated his boss!

I have to tell you that when I went searching to figure out what in the world this parable is about, I found that there are about as many interpretations of it as there are people who've

ever thought about it. One thing that stood out, though, is an understanding of how this kind of accounting worked at that time. Apparently there would be the original amount owed—such as fifty jugs of olive oil—and then the steward’s commission on top of that. So it’s *possible* that when he slashed what they owed, he was actually cutting out his own commission—a kind of short-term pain for long-term gain deal.

And that’s a possible explanation for the rich man’s response to what this steward has done—he praises him! He commends him for acting shrewdly.

It does seem weird, though, doesn’t it? It’s as if the owners of that factory came to the man who had stolen the wheelbarrows and said, “Good job, man. You were really clever.”

We’d really like this parable *not* to say that the man was praised for being clever enough—shrewd enough—to cheat his employer before he was let go. Because it seems that Jesus is also approving of what the man did. And that goes against the grain for us. This guy is a cheater, so what the heck is Jesus doing commending his behavior?

Let’s turn it around for a moment and look at what the steward did, not from the point of view of the master this time, but from the point of view of the peasants who worked the land on this rich man’s estate. It’s very likely that that if these workers were not slaves, they lived very similarly to the sharecroppers or tenant farmers we know about in the U.S. They rented the land from the owner, and very likely they bought their seed and everything else they needed in order to farm, on credit from the equivalent of the company store, on credit to the master. And by the end of the year, they probably ended up just a bit more in debt than they were the year before. And here came this steward **and forgave their debts.**

What does the steward do? Sarah Dylan Breuer, a contemporary theologian, writes:

The steward forgives. He forgives things that he [has] no right to forgive. He forgives for all the wrong reasons, for personal gain and to compensate for past misconduct. But that's the decisive action that he undertakes to redeem himself from a position from which it seem he couldn't be reconciled, to the landowner any more than to the farmers.

So what's the moral of this story, one of the stories [found only in] Luke?

It's a moral of great emphasis for Luke: FORGIVE. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no reason at all.<sup>1</sup>

It's what Jesus does, what God does. We owe so much—more than we could ever repay—and we are forgiven those debts. As we are called to forgive our debtors.

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer says so: “Give us each day our daily bread; *and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us*” (Luke 11:3-4).

Hunh. This parable isn't about cheating the master. It's not about stealing wheelbarrows or anything else, for that matter. It's about forgiving debts. It's about setting people free so that their indebtedness is not dragging them down, keeping them in place, keeping them enslaved.

*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*

Hunh. How are we to forgive people? I suppose if we have control of their financial debts, we can forgive those ... but most of us don't have that kind of financial power. But how else can we forgive?

- For some folks there's a kind of social indebtedness. You know—we've hosted you at our home, so now it's time for you to host us—you owe us.
- Or an indebtedness of favors—like when we've gone out of our way to do something for someone who needed some help and then think (or say), “Yeah, you owe me!”
- Or when we think, “Oh, for heaven's sake, isn't it someone *else's* turn to be in charge of this fundraiser ... or clean this kitchen ... or serve on Session.”
- Or when we find ourselves not wanting to listen to the latest long-winded story from a friend or family member, because, geez, it's their turn to listen to us! And maybe it's even their turn to pray for us instead of our always praying for them!

Forgiveness is called for when we've come to see the world as a system of balances, of tit-for-tat, of “I'm holding on to what is mine—energy, time, talent, money—until those other folks

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/09/proper\\_20\\_year\\_.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/09/proper_20_year_.html)

have paid for their own.” Or at least shown that they’re deserving. Or debased themselves by begging.

But in the text, the steward is commended for acting shrewdly. We are told that he has squandered the money—and squandering there means sowing it widely, liberally, profligately. He has not honored that wealth for its own sake. Rather—even for the most selfish of reasons—he has strewn it generously amongst the people.

This text is about using the wealth—the gifts—that have been entrusted to us to care for others and thus to be faithful to God. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much,” the passage says, “and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much” (16:10).

Whatever gifts you have, be faithful with them. Do you have talents—can you sing or dance or balance books or comfort a crying child or mow a lawn or write a letter ... or work for peace or tutor children or work toward the eradication of AIDS? Do you have money? Enough to put a teenager through college ... or to buy a homeless person a sandwich? Whatever gifts you have, be faithful with them—use them to spread God’s love generously amongst the people.

For we can hold our gifts tight in our arms ... we can treasure our gifts and clasp them tight so no one else can see them or touch them or benefit from them. Or we can sow them liberally in the world. We can serve the gifts we have been given. Or we can serve God.

Let us serve God.

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Let us pray.

Oh God. As we contemplate our lives and the gifts you have given us, help us to remember that they are gifts from you and that we are your stewards in their use. May we not forget that they are given to us to be *squandered*—spread widely in the world for the benefit of your people.

And may we forgive the debts of others, acting as your servants in all that we do. Amen.