



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS
THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 22, 2019
AMOS 8:4-7; PSALM 113; 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-7; LUKE 16:1-13

IT'S A WONDERFUL SYSTEM

I'm going to quote something from Jimmy Stewart's character George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* – and I don't want you to get upset that I'm already bringing up a Christmas movie when it's not even Halloween yet! Because there's this great line in it that really speaks to today's tricky Gospel passage. Now the gist of the story is that George is in big trouble with some missing money – not his fault, but it's still missing on his watch – and he's so distraught that God sends his guardian angel Clarence down to Earth to help George out. Many of you have seen it, right? Well, Clarence is a rather hapless, disheveled-looking angel.

-And so George is understandably dubious, and asks, *"What happened to your wings?"*

-And Clarence answers: *"I haven't won my wings, yet. I have to earn them. And you'll help me, will you?"*

-George plays along: *"Sure, sure. How?"*

-Clarence says: *"By letting me help you."*

-And despondent George snipes: *"I know one way you can help me. You don't happen to have 8,000 bucks on you?"*

-Clarence says: *"No, we don't use money in Heaven."*

-George growls: *"Well, it comes in real handy down here, bud!"*

And isn't that the truth, right? That's how the system works here – and how we work the system here.

Now doesn't that clear up that complicated Gospel about the Dishonest Manager that we just heard?

...I'm still working it out, too. But that's okay – because chewing on Scripture is what we should be doing. That's a big part of our prayer system. And chewing on Scripture brings up three areas of questions (at least): What did it mean **then**, in Jesus' day? What does it mean for us **now**, in our own cultural context? And what is the Spirit

holding up for me – and YOU – **personally**, in the story in this Gospel?

So before we go back to George Bailey, let's start with "then." In the ancient world, the manager was in charge of all the master's affairs and money. The master may have lived far away, even, and his manager took care of the entire household and property, and getting tenants onto the land, setting and collecting the rent – paid in produce, not cash. That was the system.

Some Bible scholars, trying to figure out how to understand how this dishonest manager story could be any kind of example, speculate that in likely practice, this manager would have added a premium to what he was collecting for the master, to be able to line his own pocket. So they contend that when the manager cut the amounts the tenants owed, he must have been eliminating just his own cut, and *that's* why the master could applaud him for being shrewd, and not be angry.

MAYBE. But we don't know that. We don't know for sure that that's even where Luke's point lies, that we even need to figure out what to *us* would be a "legitimate" reason for the master to commend this guy for his sneaky play – even though that's where our fair-play attention goes and what we are aching to figure out. Maybe this was just an example of like-recognizing-like: "Gotta give you that one, buddy. Well played. Well played."

What we do know is that this manager was wise in the ways of the world, knew the system, and he knew he had to come up with something pretty

slick, and pretty quick, if he was going to save himself from being out on the street. For, as Jesus tells it, "the children of this age are shrewd in dealing with their own generation." Decisive action. The master commended *that*.

And Jesus also says, the "children of the light," meaning his followers, need to be as wise as that in dealing with the more important things of the true Kingdom! (Ok, without going over to the dark side, like the manager.) But the point is made: can the children of the light be that decisive and act for the good with that shrewdness and intention?

And so, taking the parable into the "now": can we use our wits, our talents, our resources, our good will, our money – which is the currency of this day-to-day life – with the same shrewdness for living in the reign of God, the *eternal* kingdom, as we do figuring out our worldly machinations. Because we are very entrenched in the world of economy and material. We know how to work the system and we put a lot of energy there; we have to. How do we put as much attention to Jesus' call to living into the Kingdom of light, to caring for each other? Don't we have to do that, too, even more so?

The clearest line in this parable is that we can't serve both God and money; that is a constant theme in the Gospels – *where your treasure lies there will your heart be also* – but we know that we can serve God in the ways we use our money!

Now, that's one pretty straightforward interpretation of this parable, but there are so

many layers, and so many paths you could take, in your own thoughts, your own prayer life, in unpacking it. Especially because it's a complicated one. **That's the third thing.** First, what did Scripture mean in its own cultural context, important. Second what might it mean, in our current, different cultural context – also important. And now, where the rubber hits the road, what does it mean for you, in your own life. Where is the Spirit drawing *your* attention in this parable? That's a riff on the Ignatian prayer practice of Lectio Divina – focusing on how the Spirit is speaking to you through what stands out in the text to **you**.

It could be anything! All these questions! And I know you're sitting there saying, yes, but you're the preacher today. That's *your job*, Nancy!

I know – and I still invite you to read this Gospel again when you go home, and see what strikes you, where the Spirit is moving. But I will say that I myself am struck by the repetition of *faithfulness* in this parable – what it means about money, and working the system – “the system” meaning EVERYTHING about how we go through the world. Are we faithful in how we use our wealth, and how we use our gifts? Are our intentions the intentions of faithful children of the light, or are we completely mired in being shrewd children of this age? Because the goodwill from the tenants is only going to take that

manager so far, right? And our vision is eternal life!

You see, the Gospel writer of Luke has a focus. This parable of the Dishonest Manager that we just read doesn't pop up out of the blue in his Gospel. Luke has it in a string of parables Jesus is telling, following The Parable of the Lost Sheep and The Parable of the Lost Coin – where the singular valuable thing is sought until found – and immediately before today's Parable of the Dishonest Manager is The Parable of the Prodigal Son – sensing a theme here, right?

Jesus is teaching about being faithful to what matters. I love the way one blogger put it: Though the Prodigal Son, whom we know so well, and the Dishonest Manager we just read about, end up as the beneficiaries of grace, their initial actions are not admirable, in both stories. They have lost sight of what really matters, and that plays out as love of money instead of love of what is priceless. So in these parables, money is ill-used, but something more important comes to light. Faithfulness. See how Jesus continually teaches his disciples, and admonishes the Pharisees, to put their heart and devotion and wisdom to what really matters. Earthly wealth, we know, is not what really matters, but it **is** a tool to be used wisely in caring for each other as we live as faithful children of the light.¹

Now, I can't deny George Bailey's assessment of the system about money: *It does come in real*

[parable-of-the-shrewd-manager-ab/16719](https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/220/prominent-theologians-answer-to-what-is-the-parable-of-the-shrewd-manager-ab/16719) (with paraphrasing)

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<https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/220/prominent-theologians-answer-to-what-is-the->

handy down here, bud. Yet for the children of light, Jesus has upended everything! The systems that are set up to chew people up, our economic systems throughout history – and NOW -- are not to be the way of the Kingdom. It's a new system. Faithfulness to Jesus is an active call to attention and action, in ancient days, in our own current cultural context, and in my own personal sense of this parable.

Spoiler alert: George gets the money he needs – and he DOES need money – because he has been so faithful to the people in his community that they, in turn, are faithful to him, showering him

with coinage and with genuine love. They take care of each other, wisely and with intention; it is reciprocal. Now THAT's a new economic system that looks a lot more like children of light.

We've got skills, we've got money, we've got goods, we've got our labor, we've got consciences, we've got tools, we've got voting, we've got our wits. We know enough to use those wisely to further our mundane life. How much more should we use them wisely to further the Kingdom?

I hear employing that kind of shrewdness as faithfulness. What do you hear in there?

Luke 16:1–13 [*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 this 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 a very little is faithful 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."]



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