

SERMON
“How Shrewd of You”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Jeremiah 8: 18-9: 1

My joy is gone; grief is upon me, my heart is sick.

Luke 16: 1-13 (translation taken from the old *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible)

He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be a steward.’ And the steward said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measure of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘How much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and write eighty.’⁸The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon (dishonest wealth), so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitation.

He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s; who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

SERMON

The parable before us this morning has got to be on the top 10 list of Weirdest Scripture Passages. In it, Jesus commends a dishonest practice. He tells about a rich man who heard that his business manager was wasting his merchandise. The boss calls in this wasteful steward saying, “Show me the books.”

Once fired, the real swindle begins. Even back in Jesus’ time, people must have been given some notice when fired, for after the dishonest steward has been fired he is still hanging out at the office. He’s hanging out wondering what the heck he’s going to do now. A light bulb goes off and he calls his boss’s debtors offering them a chance to pay less than retail. “That which was going to cost you a hundred, I’m going to let you have for half price.” He does this thinking, “These people to whom I’ve given a really good deal will help me out later.”

Then Jesus says that the boss calls in this thieving, swindling employee and then says, - - -. What do you expect him to say? You expect him to say, “You blankety-blank rotten scoundrel—here I’ve given you two weeks’ notice and with the additional time you’ve gone from wasting my merchandise to losing me money. How could you?” That’s what we would expect him to say, wouldn’t we?

Instead he says, “Great work! **How Shrewd of You!** I wish everyone showed as much initiative and creativity as you.” Not what you would expect.

Jesus was into this kind of shock tactic. He uses it time and again in his parables. And if I was fair to his teaching, I’d leave you there...and oh, I should throw out the master’s final comment, “for the worldly people are better at **shrewdness** than Godly people. And then Jesus’ totally baffling summary statement, “And I, Jesus, tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal

habitation.” This is where I should leave you...to stew in your own juices...trying to figure it out—if...I was true to Jesus’ teaching style.

Chances are, all that mumbo jumbo that follows about the faithful or dishonest being faithful or dishonest with little will then be faithful or dishonest with much, was a “clean up” tactic. Something tacked on to Jesus’ teaching by a later scribe in an attempt to make Jesus more palatable. Of this we are often guilty when we try to unpack Jesus’ teachings.

Not to worry! Whether this was the case or not, I won’t send you home dangling. We pastor types are suppose to pass on to you the word of God as we hear it: what we hear God saying to us through scripture. That’s my job, I’m told. Well, three weeks ago when I was writing my sermon on the “Lost and Found Department”—about that series of parables strung together about all things lost being found—I came across this story.

Kate Huey, from our home office in Cleveland, Ohio, tells a story her mom told her. In 1918, when her mother was two years and four months old, she was playing with her older sisters at a neighbor’s house two doors away from home. She decided she wanted to go home. Kate’s aunts, who were four and six years old, did not have the sense to stop her or to take her home themselves. So her mom toddled out to the sidewalk, and turned right instead of left, the wrong direction. Her mom said she was certain she would know her house when she saw it, but she didn’t see it. Now it did not occur to her, as she walked and walked, looking for home, that she had **taken a wrong turn** and needed to turn around. Instead, she walked and walked and walked, even crossing the streetcar tracks—this little two-year-old walked a whole mile—until she came to a little corner grocery store, where the owner saw her, called the police, and gave her some candy while they waited for her parents to come and get her. Meanwhile, Kate’s very pregnant grandmother was frantically looking everywhere for her little daughter, and all the

neighbors were helping. They were in a panic (imagine how long it took a two-year-old to walk a mile!), and Kate's grandfather was called home from work to help in the search. Then the call came from the police, and her grandfather went to the store and brought his little girl home to her waiting mother's arms. The story goes that when the little girl was safely home she said, "Me find Mommy," and promptly fell asleep and slept until noon the next day.¹

As I reflected on this two weeks ago, a story being recommended as a good illustration of the great joy we experience when that which is lost is found, I realized I could not use it to exemplify great joy. Why? Because what keeps going through my mind was what if they had not found her. What if she had not made it safely across the streetcar tracks and to that corner grocery store? I could not use this story to illustrate the great joy of being found when lost, when there are so many stories floating around out there about children that have never been found, nor will ever be found. The stories about children, people and things that are no more—gone for good, lost forever, blocked me from using this story. How could I use an illustration that seems to indicate there are some fortunate enough to find or be found, when others are not?

Luckily, I read ahead in the lectionary, so I knew today's scripture falls right after the series of parables about the great joy over all things lost being found. It is no coincidence that Luke sets the parable of the dishonest-but-shrew steward next to the lost and found department.

It is Luke's way of saying, "Yes, God will never give up on us when we make a wrong turn and end up lost, but what about the time when a wrong turn leaves us destitute and robbed of all hope? How do we pick our heads up off the pillow again when our child does not make it across the streetcar tracks because she made such an innocent wrong turn?"

Three weeks ago, this was the question I heard God throw out for my consideration. So I jotted it down as an idea to work with for my next sermon. I discovered as I worked with the

¹ Huey, Kathryn Matthews, UCC website under *Sermon Seeds*, "Growing in God's Love."

idea that I did not want to go there. I wanted desperately to send you home to wrestle with it on your own for we, in the church, are much more comfortable with a theology that God only comes bearing good news. We do not like having to look at the times in our lives when we've been more than a little disappointed with God's finding skills. From parents who died way too young, leaving me to find my way in the world, to a husband who lost himself in a bottle to never resurface before he blew his brains out, to, (oh, you get the picture)...I have to admit there have been times when I have been sorely disappointed with God's finding skills. My hunch is I'm not in this alone.

The man in today's story has lost his job because he made a major wrong turn. He's faced with a major loss from which there is no return. His job is past history. That which was is gone. It will never be again. **“What to do?” he asks himself?** Well, he does not waste any time playing the “what if” game, or the “who to blame” game, or the “poor me, ain't it awful” game or the “obsessive-addict” game of numbing his feelings with alcohol, drugs or food. He acts **shrewdly**, which is a word that can also be translated as...“astute, on the ball, smart, perceptive, insightful, wise, clever, or sharp-witted”. He comes up with a clever game plan and gets on with life. Not a game plan that would bring back that which was lost—for that is gone and will never be again—instead he devises a plan that opens the door for new possibilities.

We may embrace this when it comes to someone losing a job. “Can't cry over spilt milk!” “When you fall, you *gotta* get back on the horse!” We've got all kinds of sayings about moving on with life when life gets tough. But what about the two years and four months old little girl who does not successfully navigate the streetcar tracks to that corner grocery store...how does this advise of Jesus' apply?

To the divested mother and father who weep day and night, or to the prophet Jeremiah, who grieves for his people who are suffering through a time of great loss who says, “My joy is gone. My grief is beyond healing. My heart is sick within me.” To these we would never consider saying, “Come on! Get over it! Get on with life.” How cold! How mean spirited! When someone is suffering great loss, it is tacky to start throwing out clichés and quick fixes...even for Jesus.

So what are we to make of this parable? It is a tricky one, meant to perplex us and get our brain ticking. One thing we need to highlight here is that in Jesus’ one sentence summary of the parable, he does not recommend that his disciples make friends with “unrighteous mammon” or worldly wealth. Let’s take another look at that summary sentence again. “And I, Jesus, tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth.” (Luke 16: 9a) The “worldly wealth” is the instrument to be used in making friends. By the means of your worldly wealth make friends, so that when your worldly wealth fails you (as it most certainly will when facing the greatest of losses) your friends will receive you into their eternal home.

When that which was lost won’t be found, can’t be found—hopefully we will have been wise enough, astute enough, perceptive enough,—insightful, clever, and sharp-witted enough to have made friends with those who will take us into their eternal home. Wealth is not bad when we use it as an instrument to help the debtors. We get so caught up in the manager cheating his boss, we lose sight of the debtors helped.

“Eternal home” allegorizes the “debtor’s home” to which the parable says we will be invited. We pray it every Sunday and a few times in between; “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” More than once I have read or heard a biblical scholar say that debt, what we owe others, includes financial debts. Luke’s gospel shows Jesus to be deeply concerned

about money. Luke tells the parable of the rich fool, the prudent servant, the rich man's banquet, and the story of poor Lazarus and the rich man. Luke shows Jesus pointing us to the importance of our relationship with money. Here he's saying, according to what I hear God telling me, "Worship money if you must, but know it will not wrap its arms around you when the rug's pulled out from under you. It will not invite you into an eternal home that begins on this side of heaven—a place where our sad, sad hearts can be mended."

Jeremiah shouts as he mourns for the slain of his nation, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Gilead lay to the east of Anathoth, Jeremiah's small village, and east of Jerusalem. It was over Gilead that the sun rose in the morning casting a shadow of hope over the village and the city, for there grew the plants that supplied the balm physicians used to heal.

So Jeremiah shouts, "Is there no balm even in Gilead? Is there no physician, no prophet, no priest, no healer, no teacher who can cure the sick, sick hearts of my people?" Jeremiah does not leave us with the answers we want to hear for with another question he implies...there is no balm. "Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

All I can tell you, it seems Jesus is saying, "Whatever the human condition we find ourselves in, if we are clever, creative "befrienders", who forgive debts, we will be invited into heavenly places filled with ample balm from Gilead. It seems Jesus is saying, "If we do not get stuck in playing the "what if" game (what if she had just made the right turn), or the "who to blame" game (I should have never have let her go play at her cousins alone), or the "poor me ain't it awful" game or the "obsessive-addict" game of numbing feelings with alcohol, drugs or food—if we do not get lost in these hellish places and we are shrewd enough to devise a plan that opens up new possibilities for our individual and corporate lives, then, oh then, we will be

invited into an eternal home that begins right here on earth... filled with love powerful enough
“to make the wounded whole.” Amen.