

Luke 16: 1-13 "Shrewd Christians" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/22/2019

Five year old Ricky wanted to learn to answer the phone by himself. So he watched and listened carefully. One day he got to the phone first, clicked the answer button and knew just what to say: "Hello, nope, goodbye!" and immediately hung up. Sometimes we make up our minds about scripture and immediately hang up before it causes us too much anxiety. Today's text may be one of those which makes you want to hang up now. Mark Twain says, "Most people are bothered by those Scripture passages which they can't understand. But for me, the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand." You might find yourself thinking the same with regards to our parable today. First, I will tell you that there is no doubt from scholars that the majority of this parable came right out of Jesus' mouth. Well, darn...just when I think I am getting a handle on Jesus, here comes a parable that seems just wrong. If you are confused, then welcome to the party, as there are as many perspectives and interpretations of this parable as there are readers. It is known as the most confusing of all Jesus' stories, even apparently to our author. Luke seems so bothered by the parable that he most likely added the explanatory verses of 9-12 to help clarify Jesus' intent, and then concludes with that gut punch that challenges us all, "You will either love money and hate God or hate money and love God."

I have found that when I am really confused by a statement, no matter what it is, I do best by determining its context. If the media has taught us anything, it has shown us the power of context. Comments taken out of context can be deadly. Our parable which is commonly called "The Parable of the Shrewd or Dishonest Manager," comes directly after the parables of the lost coin, lost sheep, and lost or prodigal son in chapter 15. Realizing that scripture originally didn't come with chapters and verses, it is probably best to see that those 3 parables

tie directly into today's parable as well as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus a few verses later. All 5 parables are specifically told in the presence of the Pharisees, those whom Jesus calls, lovers of money.

Brian McLaren notes that we need to understand that these Pharisees didn't value people near as much as they valued money. The poor were considered a nuisance, not worth one's time, whereas catering to the rich was the ultimate goal. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had succumb to the economics of the day which revolved around the occupying influence of the Romans. The Romans were known for exploiting the natural resources of the land they occupied as well as the labors of the people. Here in the US, we don't suffer from foreign occupation, unless of course, you are Native American and then its another story. So it may be hard for us to imagine a world where the wealthy like the Romans and those in power like the religious leaders paid hardly any taxes, while the poor and shrinking middle class paid the majority of taxes. Just mind-boggling, huh? The rulers taxed the poor who couldn't afford to pay, therefore, the rich would swoop in and say, "No worries, friend, in exchange for your land, you don't have to pay as much taxes. You get to stay on as tenant farmers and give us the majority of your crops which we sell and keep the profits out of the goodness of our hearts. We get richer and some of that wealth may trickle down to you if you work hard enough. You might even get to be a manager of our land and crops, which used to be yours, and that is the beauty of our wonderful system. It is available to you as well, if you can just get enough money to join us." Some became managers which was a step-up from being a farmer and meant you didn't make the rules, you just enforced them, collecting the crops and making sure they made it to market. The poor didn't resent you near as much as they did the landowner, even though

you were expected to squeeze the farmer for all you could get. In the story today, our manager is charged with being lazy and subsequently is fired. Some landowners are just like that, firing people every few weeks, just for the sheer joy that comes with such power – You're fired...you're fired...you're fired, and so on. You are all expendable as there is always one waiting in the wings to step into your place, the landowner boasts.

The fired manager considers his options and decides that the system he has been a part of is unjust and dishonest. In Robin Hood fashion, the manager forgives the majority of the debts owed by the poor, an action that would have been unthinkable to the landlord. The manager is not only watching out for his own life and his family's life, just in case he ends up homeless and may need to knock on the door of one of those farmers, he is also working against the system he used to support. He is dismantling the landlord's system of gaining wealth and, without violence, is challenging an economy that caters to the wealthy. By reducing the debts, he gives the farmer a break while still getting something from the farmer but not everything. The manager has now switched sides and is exposing the unfairness of the existing payment structure as he goes to work on behalf of the poor. Judging this economic system that would have otherwise left him out in the cold, he begins to realize that money isn't the ultimate goal in life. Surprisingly, his shrewd actions receive praise from the landowner.

I will never forget my years at Texas Christian University in the late 80's when the school was being challenged for its investments in South Africa. I was a poor seminary student who was putting her hard-earned dollars into an institution who was making money on the backs of racism and oppression as TCU held major accounts within the diamond mines of South Africa. A group on campus began to withhold their tuition payments demanding change, the seminary

set up a Shantytown next to the TCU sign, and all of Fort Worth quickly became aware of dirty money flowing in off the backs of blacks who were being oppressed by dominant whites in that country. With picket signs, campus demonstrations, and half-payments, we made our voices heard. Some got expelled, some had grades lowered, but eventually it began to affect admissions and donors as students rallied against attending their own school. Finally, the administration paid attention and the Board of Trustees voted to divest all funds from South Africa. Much to our surprise, the President even came out and praised us for our shrewdness and passion.

Many of Jesus parables are told to portray the kind of life and relationships which define the realm or kingdom of God. In God's realm, the "tools" of oppressive systems are rendered ineffective and turned upside down. In God's realm, debts are forgiven and indentured servants are set free. In God's realm, we love God first and therefore everybody has value because of that love. In God's realm, money becomes a dirty thing when it improperly lures people towards valuing the almighty dollar over relationships. We live in a society where the value of money has brainwashed us into diminishing the value of pure air, pristine mountains, clean oceans, protected animal species, as well as the dignity and civil rights of each human being. McLaren reminds us that it is far better to use money in service of relationships rather than use relationships in service of money. In God's realm, let me assure you, there is an economic system which is established through scripture and the very words of Jesus as the voice of God. It is not necessarily a system which espouses turning over our earnings to some institution and taking a vow of poverty as is done in the priesthood. It is also not a system which mandates that we do a redistribution of wealth equality as seen in Acts 2. These are

stereotypes often assigned to Christians which have overlooked our parable today. At first glance, we wonder why Jesus didn't condemn the dishonesty of the manager, chastise the plot to secure his own future, or even put down his desire for wealth and security, but Jesus does not do that. Instead he praises the manager for his cleverness, encouraging people to be faithful to God with their possessions and wealth; to not give it all up but to use it to do good. Jesus is telling us that it is possible to manage our possessions and money in ways that lead us into life with God and into God's realm. The key is to know the endpoint – to know what life with God is truly like.

Being shrewd Christians, in this case, means using what we have for God's purposes, rather than squandering what we have for no gain at all. Being shrewd requires knowing what rules our heart, knowing whom you serve. Being shrewd means losing faith in a system that lets the rich do whatever they want, so that the crumbs off their plates will trickle down to the rest of us. If you serve wealth for its own sake, you will fail. But if you serve God and shrewdly use what you have for God's purposes, you will enjoy the blessings of life...in God's realm. In God's realm, Amen.