

“Investments That Last”

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. 2So he summoned him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” 3Then 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. 4I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.” 5So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” 6He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” 7Then 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.” 8And 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. 9And 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. 10 ‘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. 11If

then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13No 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 is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I've never preached on this parable before, but as I started reading through a variety of commentaries on this passage, what was almost universal is that *everyone* feels confused by it. And the longer I read these commentaries, the more it felt like I could hear these commentators laughing at me because they didn't actually need to preach about this parable on Sunday, and I do! So, if you feel confused or troubled by the way Jesus celebrates the work of this dishonest manager, you are in great company. A whole cloud of witnesses is right there with you.

Many of the questions produced by this parable have led to almost as many interpretations of it as there are theologians: Is the “dishonest steward” really doing an act of justice, forgiving the part of the debt owed to the rich man that was all interest and very little of the principal loan? Was the rich man impressed by this shrewd business person working for him because he managed to pull a fast one and protected himself to provide for his own future? Or was the rich man surprised and grateful because the steward was actually bringing the rich man back into compliance with the Jewish law not to lend at interest? I would rather have a good meal at a round table with all of you and spend hours talking and listening to each other to see where this parable takes us. But in

the meantime, I wanted to offer you a reflection that was shared in one of the last commentaries I read on this passage from a theologian named David Lose. It gripped me with a word that I believe can be instructive for us today in this brief moment we have together. Here's what David has to say:

“Recently... a friend made a suggestion that helped me see this parable in a whole new way. He compared the “dishonest wealth” Jesus mentions to the fate of the Confederate currency near the end of the Civil War. As the prospect of a Confederate victory declined, those bills and coins became increasingly worthless, prompting holders to spend them freely in the hope of purchasing something — anything! — before they held no value whatsoever.”¹ End of quote. This little intersection of history and Scripture took me back to verse 9, to one little word, “when”: “And I tell you,” Jesus said “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that *when* it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” There is an expiration date on all the wealth in our world. It will pass away some day - it isn't a matter of if, but *when*.

I'm not sure what this parable will speak to us on another day, at another time, but today, I have to wonder if what Jesus was commending in this manager was not the man's backhanded behavior, not his sneaking around to benefit himself, but his understanding that the power of the wealth in his possession is brief and limited and that *today* is the day to leverage it for something that will last: relationship with others. Now, you could argue, probably rightly, that the relationships this man is forming

¹ David Lose, *Luke 16:1-13*,
<http://www.davidlose.net/2013/11/luke-16-1-13/>

with wealth are completely self-centered - a way for him to get invited into the safety of the homes of those who will be in his debt once he no longer has a job with the rich man. But what I love about Jesus is that, since he wasn't afraid to hang out with some pretty messy characters, he can look at even this problematic, possibly manipulative manager and say, "Hey, children of light, you've got something to learn from this guy! He gets that wealth is *as fleeting as it is powerful* and that it is best used to invest in something that will last: relationships." I wonder if through this confounding parable Jesus might be calling us, the children of light, to spend freely our wealth, just like the bills and coins of a broken period of human history like the Confederacy, to purchase something that will last. More specifically, I wonder if Jesus is inviting us to invest our wealth in relationships where we embody the God of the parables we heard about last week, the God who searches in the wilderness for one sheep that got lost, the God who sweeps the floor of Her house at night until she finds the one coin that needed to be found. Perhaps God is inviting us to name the reality of wealth's limited, but powerful nature, all the while spending our money in ways that our recklessly generous God modeled for us by giving up the throne of heaven and going to the cross in order to bring back the lost sheep, the lost coins whom God was so desperate to find.

A couple commentators this week pointed out that usually when pastors preach about money, it's because it is stewardship season and it is time to start thinking about how God might be leading folks to give financially to enliven the church's ministry. That's a worthy pursuit, but today, we are actually going to do the opposite. In your bulletin this morning, there is an envelope with a

\$5 bill inside, which I mentioned during the announcements. We have decided to give some money from our budget back to you, the congregation, for a special assignment from your What Disciples Do journal this week. This week, we put into practice Jesus' call to resist greed by giving freely and generously, spending the wealth of this age in ways that bring to life to relationships of self-giving love. So this week, we invite you to take that \$5 bill, pray about a way God might be calling you to invest it in a relationship where you can share the reckless love of God, and then spend the money accordingly. Perhaps as you pray, God will bring to mind the teacher of your grandchild who you have noticed seems extra discouraged, and perhaps you'll stop by the coffee shop to pick up their favorite drink with a note that says "You are doing such a great job - keep up the incredible work!" Or maybe you see a woman holding a sign asking for money as you drive out of the Fred Meyer parking lot, and you feel God prodding you to stop and ask her if there's anything you can buy her in the grocery store - maybe you'll learn her name and ask if there is any way you can support, encourage, or even pray for her. Or, if you would feel most comfortable, feel free to simply put that money back in the offering plate today as you say a prayer for a specific ministry of our church, where we walk together to seek Christ's way and welcome all people. There are lots of ways to spend this money freely to show someone in your life the reckless love of God. The only requirement is that you pray before using it, and that you listen for how God is calling you to invest it in someone who needs to know God loves them.

There are a few questions in your What Disciples Do journal that will invite you to reflect on the experience of spending that

money this week to invest in someone who needs to know God is for them and with them. There will also be a little space in worship next week for you to share stories from the experience, and we would also invite you to write your story on one of the paper clouds in the back so folks can read it and be challenged and encouraged.

\$5 is such a small amount of money, but the hope is that this exercise will help all of us sow seeds of radical love, joining Jesus in bringing heaven to earth.

Please pray with me...

Holy One, you have been so generous with us. When wealth starts telling lies about having the final say in this world, show us how to resist greed and follow you in the path of recklessly generous love. We hold now a space of quiet, a moment for you to speak. Speak to us now about where our \$5 can nurture a relationship this week that brings joy to Your heart...

(space of silence)

Amen.