



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 15 – Proper 20 (C)**

#### **Squandering Love**

**[RCL] Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13**

Jesus offers money management advice in our Gospel reading, saying, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

This does not sound like solid investment advice, does it? Follow that counsel and you’ll be buying fair-weather friends through less than honorable means. Why did Luke value sharing this in the Gospel? What are we missing?

One problem with hearing this story rightly is that Bibles and Sunday School lessons give parables a name that shapes how we hear them. This story is called “The Parable of the Unjust Steward” or even “The Parable of the Shrewd Manager.” Jesus did not name his parables. He simply told them.

Jesus begins by saying, “There was a rich man who had a manager.” The one to watch in this story is the rich man. This is exactly what happens with the parable Jesus told immediately before this one as a two-parable set. In the verses before the parable for today, Luke’s Gospel tells “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Yet, there too, Jesus begins, “There was a man who had two sons.” By the end of that story, we realize that the parable we call “The Prodigal Son” is better named “The Parable of the Forgiving Father,” for it is the father’s action and not the actions of his two sons that are the heart of that story.

Here, too, we have “The Parable of the Forgiving Rich Man.” Or better yet, as the boss is referred to in the Greek as “Lord,” we should call the story we read today, “The Parable of Our Forgiving Lord.” The story begins when the lord, who is the wealthy boss, learns that his steward was squandering his property. The word “squandering” is uncommon in the New Testament, but Jesus just used the same word to say that the son who demanded his inheritance from his father ends up squandering his wealth in riotous living. Both the prodigal son and the shrewd manager have squandered the gift that was given them. Both find forgiveness.

Jesus is talking here about the ways in which we humans squander the gifts that God gives us. In this, we sit alongside the son and the manager from these parables. We are all stewards of a life we were given by God, which we are called to give back to God. All we have is not really ours. Someone else will one day

live in your house. Someone else will hold your job. Your property is yours for now, but not yours in any eternal sense. The stuff you have is only yours for a little while in the eternal scheme of things.

To squander is to scatter or waste. Squandering also carries the meaning of being extravagant. To squander is to take what is entrusted to you and, one way or another, blow it and end up with little to show for all you received. Jesus is surely talking about money in this passage, but he is talking about much more than money. The question is: How do the ways you use the gifts you have received give honor to God? In the ways your money and possessions do not honor God, you are squandering what has been entrusted to you.

But let's turn back to the parable for a closer reading. Once the steward is caught squandering the boss' possessions, he is told he will have to give an accounting of his management. Then he is apparently sent out to get the accounting together. Rather than working on cooking the books, the steward takes bold action. He knows there is no covering up his wasting the rich man's resources. He also knows his present job is the only one for which he is qualified. No one will hire a disgraced manager who squandered his last boss' property, and so he is in a real bind. He goes to those who owe the boss and lowers their debt. In this way, he curries the favor of the debtors using even more of his boss' money to get in their good graces.

All towns are, in the end, small towns where folks know one another's business. The rich man learns what the steward is doing. Now what is the boss to do? He could go back on what the manager has done, but those who owe him, those who had part of the debt forgiven only to have it added back, will not think better of him. This is a culture in which honor and shame matter very much. The only admirable path for the rich man is to honor the debt forgiveness of the manager. Better to be thought well of for forgiving debt than to be the one who had to have every last penny. Still, to do so will mean that the rich man is now squandering his own property, forgiving real debts only because the unjust manager said they were forgiven.

I use the word forgiven on purpose. In speaking of sin and forgiveness, Luke uses the language of debt and forgiveness of debt. As Luke tells it, we owe a debt to God, and God forgives that debt, putting what we owe on Jesus' tab. It's not fair exactly, but this is who God is and how God acts, and it is more than fair to those of us who are the debtors.

Jesus then begins to wrap up, saying, "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." It is faithfulness to which we are called. Those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much. For Jesus, all money is Monopoly money; If you don't treat meaningless stuff like money, well then, how will you treat something truly valuable like another human being?

Jesus says that we are to use what we have to serve God. That is the real lesson here. Rather than paying attention to the steward, whether we consider him to be unjust or shrewd, we are to notice the rich man,

the true owner of that which has been squandered. In this parable, as in the linked story of the prodigal son, we find that God is ready and willing to squander forgiveness, giving that grace away extravagantly, offering love to those who do not deserve it.

Each story in this pair of parables tells of the need to be good stewards of all that has been entrusted to us. A steward cares for the property of others. God's perspective reveals that anything I own, I have for a time, but it is not mine in any permanent way. My house will be lived in by others. Someone else will likely drive my current car after I have sold it. All of the assets I build up in this life will one day pass to my heirs, but for now, it is mine to manage. I am to care well for all that is entrusted to me, rather than to hoard it as personal treasure. It's all Monopoly money anyway. Our time and talent and treasure are to be invested in love and compassion. We are to give as Jesus gave, forgive as Jesus forgave, and to love as Jesus loves us. For the more you offer freely the grace, mercy, and compassion that all our neighbors need as much as we do, the more you will build up what Jesus called "true riches." For Jesus, loving God and your neighbor is the soundest investment possible; everything else passes away, but love never ends.

***The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue** is the Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia. He previously served on the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church and was the church planter for King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia.*