

9-21-25 Sermon: “Risky Business” – Luke 16:1-13

For the last month, we’ve been doing a sermon series called “*That’s not in the Bible!*” Today’s Gospel reading might top a similar list – things you can’t believe *are* in the Bible! The parable of the shrewd manager, as you just heard, is perhaps one of the strangest things that Jesus ever says.

Basically, a man gets fired for mismanaging his boss’s money. Desperate to secure *something* for his future, he goes behind his boss’s back and commits fraud. But when the boss discovers the scheme, he praises the manager for his cleverness. And – here’s the kicker! – Jesus says, “Yes. This. Think like this manager.”

The best commentary I’ve ever heard on this parable consists of five words from my delightfully irreverent friend Rachel: “Jesus? You’re drunk. Go home.”

Perhaps even stranger is the fact that Gospel-writer Luke puts this crazy parable in the Bible! And we can tell that the parable makes Luke uncomfortable because he adds all these unrelated sayings at the end of it – verses 10-13 – ostensibly trying to make sense of it. “Whoever is dishonest with a little,” Luke writes, “will be dishonest with much.” Well yeah, so like, the manager? The guy Jesus told us to imitate two verses ago!

But you know who I really have to give it to here? The people who put together the lectionary! Because not only did they decide to include this story in our assigned readings – they could have just left it out! – but they put it in September, which means it shows up right before stewardship season.

Great idea, y’all! We’re about to ask people to pledge money to the church, but first, let’s hear Jesus give the stamp of approval to a shady, money-swindling book-cooker! And in related news, your pledge cards should soon be arriving in the mail.

We really don’t know what to make of this parable, do we? Our small group Bible studies recently studied Jesus’ parables, so I asked them – Did you figure this one out? Any insights to share? I think the best answer I got was from one of you who said, “Do you think maybe Jesus was being facetious? And we missed the point and put it in the Bible?”

Maybe. I do think it’s quite likely that we’ve missed the point. There are some cultural and linguistic gaps here, perhaps most obviously in verse 9, where the NRSV reads, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” Because our English Bibles say dishonest wealth, but the Greek says, “*unjust mammon*, or “wealth of injustice.” Which implies that maybe the manager isn’t the biggest problem in this parable; maybe the problem is the wealth itself.

Or is it a problem? Jesus has a lot to say about money: Mostly that the rich have too much and the poor have too little, so our job is to share it and redistribute it so that everyone has *enough*. And in this parable, when the manager reduces what the debtors owe his master, he is 100% looking out for himself and his future security, don’t get me wrong...but he is also redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor...which *is* what Jesus is always trying to get us disciples to do. The manager may be a swindling con man, but he’s also a sort of accidental Robin Hood, managing unjust wealth in the direction of justice.

And Jesus says to his disciples: I want you to learn from this guy.

Now, surely the lesson to take from the manager is not his dishonesty or his fraud. But I wonder...is it possible that Jesus is asking us to imitate his ingenuity? His cleverness, his resourcefulness, his commitment to his goal. Unlike the children of light – righteous disciples who often want to detach from the world and keep themselves ‘pure’ and ‘spiritual’ –

this guy is willing to get his hands dirty. His desperation causes him to take risks, think outside the box, and work for the Kingdom of Heaven in decidedly unorthodox ways.

Over the last several years, I have spent a lot of time reading and talking with colleagues about something that's being called the "church property transition." Basically, those who study demographics are telling us that we are going through a major shift in the religious landscape of America, and it is likely – almost inevitable – that many churches are going to be closing their doors in the next couple decades, some estimate as many as 100,000. It's sad, but it's true – and it means these church buildings and properties are going to be changing hands.

The folks I'm talking with about transition are asking, "How do we use this – even this, the closing of tens of thousands of churches – and make it into something good? How can we, like Luke's shrewd manager, take even the most dismal of circumstances and find the opportunity to advance God's Kingdom?"

One of the organizations doing this work is the group we got the grant from – the National Fund for Sacred Places. Another, called Rooted Good, was started by a Presbyterian minister at the University of Wisconsin who decided to try a little experiment where he turned a dying campus ministry into a student housing and community-center-complex that today offers worship and Bible study alongside support groups for students of color and the LGBTQIA+ community.

What the leaders of this movement are finding is that, once they start thinking outside the box, there's really no upper or outer limit to how a church property can serve its community. Churches that have closed are being turned into affordable housing, community centers, or performing arts venues. Congregations that are still active but struggle to maintain their buildings are sharing their space with public health agencies, community clinics, other non-profits. One presbytery gave church property back to the Indigenous people who originally lived there and partnered with tribal leaders to turn the old building into a community health center for Native people.

It's unorthodox...but I think we'd be hard-pressed to say that it isn't ministry. Like the manager in the parable, these leaders are moving wealth in the direction of justice. They are asking what their neighborhoods need and how they can use their resources to provide it. And they are not afraid to get their hands dirty and take some risks in the process.

We in this congregation are fortunate not to be one of those churches looking at imminent closure. We are a healthy, vital little community of faith...and I can't help but wonder if that is, in part, because we've got a little bit of this resourceful manager in our DNA.

Over our nearly 151 years of ministry, our church has been home to preschools and Twelve step meetings, community organizations and support groups. We've been a dance hall, a yoga studio, a concert venue, a rehearsal space, and a voting booth.

A few years ago, when our friends at DreamTree asked what we'd think of putting up the homeless population of Taos for a couple months in the winter, Session said, "Sure, what could possibly go wrong?!" This kind of outside-the-box thinking is our congregational *modus operandi*; we're scrappy and enterprising, and we learn by doing (even – sometimes – doing it wrong). And friends, if I understand the parable, that's exactly the mindset that Jesus is asking of us when it comes to advancing God's Kingdom.

If that's the lesson, then I think Scripture's word for us today might just be, "Keep it up." Do not grow weary in doing good. Remain open, look for the opportunities, don't be afraid to take the harder and messier route if it seems more faithful one. Jesus never said the way, the

truth, and the life would be straight and narrow. What he said is that he'll be with us on the journey.

This summer, we completed over a quarter of a million dollars-worth of building improvements. (Y'all remember that?) And then literally the *week* that construction wrapped up, three new Twelve Step groups moved into our back building. Two of those groups hold daily AA meetings, which means that our church is now a place where ministry takes place 7 days a week, 365 days a year. (366 if in leap years.)

If that's not managing our resources in the direction of God's Kingdom, I don't know what is. Keep your eyes open, friends. I can't wait to see what God does with us next.