

Dunbarton Congregational Church  
Sunday, September 23, 2007  
10:30 a.m.

Luke 16:1-10

“The Enlightened Steward?”

I want to begin by saying that today’s scripture passage is a very difficult one. Most pastor’s avoid it. Only found in Luke’s gospel, it has inspired hundreds of commentaries and interpretations. St. Augustine himself said, “I can’t believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord.”

Well, we are going to tackle it today. In the words of one of my seminary professors, we’ll “unpack” the text so that we might understand *together* what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples, and Luke is trying to tell his first century listeners, and God is trying to tell us.

The story takes place as Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem. Taxpayers and sinners have been coming near to listen to him, and, of course, the scribes and Pharisees are grumbling. Jesus has been teaching his disciples what it means to be a true follower. He tells four parables in a sequence: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, and now, the dishonest manager.

Now let’s take out our bulletins and read through the text together. Please use the New Revised Standard Version. I which is a little different from what you have.

*16Then 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.*

In the red letter edition of the Bible Mike Hammond gave to me, this entire text is crimson. These are meant to be the exact words of Jesus. So sit back and imagine him speaking to his disciples, telling them (and us) one of his famous stories.

The rich man is most likely an absentee landlord who has put a Jewish manager in charge of his affairs. Like Levi the tax collector, managers or stewards were notorious for their greed and usurious practices. Despising wealthy, powerful people was a favorite pastime for Jesus’ audience. Believe me when I tell you that a story that includes the words “rich man,” and “manager” in the opening sentence would inspire the rapt attention of his listeners!

Now the most important word in verse 1 is “squandering,” in Greek *diaskorpizo* (*de-as-kor-PID-zo*), which means to scatter something. The prodigal son “squanders” or scatters his resources in the preceding parable—it is the link word—Jesus is addressing what we are to do with *our* resources. Notice that the property the steward squanders or scatters is not his but the master’s. What are we doing with the resources given to *us* by God?

<sup>2</sup>*So he (the master) summoned him (the steward) and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’*

The evidence in the case is heresay. The master is calling for an accounting, for proof of the steward’s transgressions. The inference is clear: if you’re guilty, you’re out. I’m somewhat impressed that the rich man gives the steward a chance. Perhaps he has been a trusted employee for many years. But don’t mistake the master for a bleeding heart sentimentalist—the message is plain: nobody messes with my wealth.

<sup>3</sup>*Then 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.’*

Well, verse 3 makes it clear that the steward has been “squandering” after all. He knows he’s a doomed man. “What will I do now?” he moans, “I’m not strong enough to dig and I’m too proud to beg.”

Are you getting a picture of this steward? He’s dishonest, he’s spoiled, he’s proud, and he’s whining like a baby because he just got what was coming to him. Now, one thing we need to remember about Jesus is that he has a wonderful sense of humor. The steward is a perfect caricature of every sleazy middle-manager you’ve ever known—the disciples are not only listening, they’re laughing their heads off! What is this loser going to do now, they’re wondering? Jesus places us inside the man’s head, exactly as he does in the preceding parable of the Prodigal son, another pretty pathetic rich boy who squanders his wealth and ends up with the pigs.

<sup>4</sup>*I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’*

Here, my friends, is where the story turns, where our comical, satirical steward suddenly becomes more complex, more human. Remember, this is Jesus’ parable, and it never pays to take Jesus lightly. Contemplating his future unemployment, and his *unemployability* (after all, what rich man is going to hire a dishonest manager), the steward’s thoughts turn, not to *wealth* but to *welcome*.

The steward is still dishonest and quite Machiavellian in his desire to finagle good will out of his former clients, but he understands at some deep and abiding level that good will is the only currency that will save him, the only currency that will save us.

*<sup>5</sup>So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' <sup>6</sup>He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' <sup>7</sup>Then 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.'*

Of course, the manager had no right to forgive these debts, just as the Pharisees believed Jesus had no right to forgive taxpayers and sinners, but the steward *r* does it anyway, certain that if he ingratiates himself to the debtors, they will be honor bound to reciprocate. He is blatantly manipulative, trading kindness for kindness, yet in this strange world we call the Kingdom of God, this strategy works!

Our steward is shameless and calculating, yes, but he ends up doing exactly what Jesus wants us to do! Love your neighbor, give away all that you have, be reckless, forgive your debtors just as your debts are forgiven. The disciples are lured into a surprise ending yet again--a wily steward, symbol of everything they despise--becomes precisely the person Christ calls us to be.

*<sup>8</sup>And 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.*

Shrewdness, *phronimos* (*PHRON-ee-mos*). The master in the end respects prudence. You see, he knows the steward has, among other things, boxed him in—he can't exactly step in and rescind the steward's largesse, now can he? Not if he wants any customers in the future! Here is Jesus' humor again. The rich man can't help but laugh—"Darn, I know why I chose that clever manager in the first place!"

So the master commends him, just as Jesus commends us when we use our brains in his name. Be clever. Be shameless if your actions serve the cause of Christ. Remember, my friends, the disciples are on the road to Jerusalem. They can't afford to be esoteric mystics--children of the light. After all, they and have a ruthless and unjust world to tame--and so do we.

When I contemplate the story of the unjust steward, I think of two things. First is Mike Hammond's Bible, so tattered and worn its covers can hardly stay together. I miss that Bible; I wish mine looked like it-- read, and re-read and revered throughout

an entire lifetime because I believe on a continual basis that it contains all the wisdom I will ever need.

The second thing I think about are our loyal DCC Farm Stand managers, eyeballing each customer on Thursdays and quickly determining the cost of the pies based on the make of their vehicles. I don't know if there is some higher business ethic that prohibits this kind of price adjustment—Bill says free enterprise is just that—but I *do* know the faith and spirit of utter loyalty behind it—the absolute and unshakable conviction that supporting Jesus and his church is worth anything, even wringing a few extra dollars from the woman with the Lexus SUV.

*<sup>9</sup>And I tell you (says Jesus), make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

Go ahead, says Jesus, like that unscrupulous steward, the guy you *think* you all hate so much, make friends by dispensing kindness, give money away, even if it's inadvertently someone else's. Use your shrewdness to advance the Kingdom of God. If you are going to be a disciple of Christ in the first century or the twenty-first, wits are essential, moxie is essential, action is essential, assertiveness is essential, cunning is essential, and courage is essential and I will leave it to you, my dear friends, to decide what that means in *your* life. Amen.