

**Highland Presbyterian Church**  
**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – September 18, 2022**  
**A sermon by Megan McCarty**

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

One commentator that I read this week in preparation of this text advised pastors to "Preach on something else, or you may end up getting fired--like the manager in the parable!" So, it feels fitting that on my first Sunday back from family leave, that I would be preaching on this text. Let's hope my first Sunday back isn't actually my last one...

Because a lot of us like to have our sermons tied up with a pretty bow - we like to be handed some concrete take aways so that we can confidently enter the week ahead rejuvenated, refreshed, and prepared to take on whatever comes our way so that we can act as the Jesus-followers that we know we can be. So, if this tidy little package is what you are hoping to be handed today, you have come to the wrong service. Today, we are doing some theological gymnastics. So, let's limber up! Maybe do some stretches.

Because we have been handed the parable of the shrewd manager. The story itself sounds quite contemporary. A dishonest manager is about to lose his job because he has misspent his employer's assets. And, because he doesn't want to do manual labor or receive charity, he goes around to all the people who owe his employer money and reduces their debts. He does this so that they will be hospitable to him after he loses his job. To our surprise, the employer commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Why is he commended for doing something that sounds so corrupt and selfish? And, why does Luke even include this cryptic story in his Gospel?

To begin to answer these questions and start stretching our theological muscles, we can take note that this parable serves as a bridge between the stories of the Prodigal Son, which we heard last week, and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Now, like the prodigal son in the preceding story, our dishonest manager has "squandered" what was entrusted to him. And, like the story that follows, this parable begins with the phrase, "There was a rich man." So it seems that Luke intentionally wanted these stories to connect to better understand their meaning and the impacts they have on our lives.

Although our dishonest manager does not repent (like the prodigal) or act virtuously (like Lazarus), he nonetheless does something with the rich man's wealth that reverses the existing order of things. In Luke, reversals of status are at the heart of what happens when Jesus and the kingdom of God appear. The proud are "scattered." The powerful are brought down and the lowly lifted; the hungry are filled and the rich are sent away empty.

To understand why the employer commends the dishonest manager for being shrewd, we must take a few steps back and start to look at some cultural norms. Many scholars believe that the amount that was forgiven by the manager was actually interest that the master had been charging. This might be one way of explaining why the manager would forgive 50% of one

loan and only 20% of the other. But, in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, charging interest for a loan would be considered making money corruptly. The money gained from these endeavors would be considered “dishonest wealth” because making money from someone else’s debt was viewed as unjust. ANY TIME people are used as capital or pawns in power plays, it creates an imbalance of power and leads to inequity. The Biblical principle of Jubilee was created to counteract these ways of injustice. According to Jubilee, every seven years all debts were erased so that the wealth gap between the rich and the poor didn’t become insurmountable.

The word for this dishonest wealth we see in the New Testament Greek is “mammon.” In the original Greek text, it appears three times in the passage that we just read. This word Mammon has been utilized and personified in several different secular plays and stories beyond the Bible. Probably the most famous is John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where Mammon is a fallen angel who is always looking down instead of looking where he is going because he is trying to find gold or coins on the ground.

Perhaps the key difference in today’s parable is that, unlike the prodigal son story and more like the parable of the rich fool, this parable is encouraging the dissipation of mammon. The first twist in the story comes when the master does not condemn but rather praises the steward for these actions. The greater twist, though, comes when Jesus praises non-believers over “children of the light” and instead, urges our imitation of the shrewdness.

The principle that Jesus is trying to convey is one of a just steward rather than an unjust one. The unjust steward saw his master’s resources as a means for his own personal enjoyment and advancement. He did the right thing by dispersing dishonest wealth, but he did it with the wrong motivation. Conversely, Jesus wants His followers to be just, righteous stewards. If we understand the principle that everything we own is a gift from God, then we realize that in this metaphor, God is the master and that we are the stewards. As such, we are to be shrewd and use the master’s resources to further the master’s work. In this specific case, we are to be generous with our wealth and use it for the benefit of others, not our own personal gain or gathering.

It can be difficult for us to remember how to do this. It’s all too easy to forget that Jesus died and was resurrected, and that life was made new; so we are to live into this new life every single day. Instead of remembering these things, it becomes a priority to serve the other pressing demands: of people, of schedule, of money. Somewhere along the way, the vision for God’s call becomes cloudy and muddled. We stop hearing God’s voice and join the crazy survivor-takes-all mentality. The challenges seem so much bigger than the answers. So we huddle in an effort to save whatever is left and we forget about living for something greater. I think the pandemic highlighted this more than we ever expected. We panicked. We hoarded. We buried our treasures instead of remembering that they are not ours; they are on loan.

The Jesus who told this parable calls us to dissipate wealth as the steward did. But to be dispossessed of the desire that our gifting produce the benefit of indebting others to us—we must also be dispossessed of the illusion that wealth gives us security and stability. If we read

the parable this way, the problem with the unjust steward is not that he "gifted" his master's debtors (even his master commends him for this), but that his gifting was poisoned by the ulterior motive of receiving something back from those to whom he gave. Jesus encourages his listeners to imitate the man's scattering of wealth in order to receive the gift that is beyond return and outside any economy of exchange.

If this is what we should be imitating, then, we should choose to be more conscious and strategic in our daily transactions and speech so that we contribute less to the pursuit of wealth for ourselves, particularly in the service of greed and creation of poverty at the expense of equity and the justice and love of God. We should give without expecting anything in return and we should recognize that how we utilize what is given to us is a spiritual discipline of itself.

It is of course important to focus on the last line of the text – that you cannot serve two masters at once. The text says, "you cannot serve God and wealth." But what the Greek actually says here is not just the word "wealth," it's that you cannot serve God and Mammon. Dishonest wealth. We must practice the spiritual discipline of shrewdness in our own transactions. But, maybe even more importantly, as a congregation, we need to hone this spiritual discipline. We are a congregation that is rich in resources and capital. And we have become so because of our shrewdness and the discernment of those who came before us. I do not think we have fallen prey to serving Mammon, but have we leaned fully into what it could look like to serve God with our resources?

Last Sunday, Jessica Maudlin gave a presentation on Earth Care here at Highland as part of the adult education fall series titled "The Church as a Source of Hope." Jessica works for the denomination as the Associate for Sustainable Living and Earth Care Concerns with the Presbyterian Hunger Program. One of her jobs is to be in contact with all of the Earth Care Congregations in the PC(USA). She told a story of a church in West Virginia that had 7 members. They felt called to do what was right for the environment with the resources that they had been given. They did research and sourced funding and utilized all their capital to put solar panels on their building. The panels generated enough power that they were able to sell the power back to the electric company. Now, this part of the story alone, is impressive for such a small church community. But Jessica went on to say that just up the road was another congregation that had 25 members. They were also contemplating solar panels but didn't think they would be able to do it with their small amount of membership and capital. After the 7-member church put in solar panels, this church followed suit. They said, if a 7-member congregation can do it, what's stopping us?!

It can be easy to look at this parable and think, "we aren't making dishonest money, we aren't serving Mammon, so we are doing things right." But that's not all it says. We have been faithful with a little and have a chance to be faithful with a lot. I wonder what kinds of creative things we might come up with once we start thinking critically about all the resources we have been given. And I'm not just talking about finances. How might we use our buildings and grounds, our parking lot, our social and political capital, our personal gifts? What is going to be our big idea; our "solar panel" project? I recognize that this congregation has been through a

lot. All congregations have had to deal with covid, but we have been dealing with covid in the midst of everything else happening with our staff. I hope that this next phase in Highland's life is one of rejuvenation and renewal. Each of you has the power to be a part of that and to take our church in the direction that we want it to go. If there is something that you want to see us take on, some new and different way to use our resources, ask how it can be done. Let's dream big and figure out what we can do to serve God faithfully with all we have been given. Because that is exactly what we are called to do.

In the name of Christ Jesus, our teacher and inspiration. Amen.