

Amos 8:4-7
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

Jesus' parables are confusing some times. As 21st century Christians, it can be hard for us to step back into his agrarian world. Of all parables, this one probably takes the cake though! Scholar after scholar has tried to interpret this text faithfully, and with very different results. It's particularly confusing for us, because we expect Jesus to teach us perfect ethics by which to live. Why then would he seem to praise this "dishonest manager"?



We often expect Jesus to have his head in heavenly clouds. But this parable sounds like it could be ripped from our news headlines! It's incredibly grounded in the financial injustice of our world today. We could be talking about Bernie Madoff or the Lehman Brothers. There are plenty of people who squander the money of others, or use money to take care of their own interests. On a grander scale, our world is incredibly divided along lines of economic class. Even in the U.S., the people who are amazingly, obscenely rich are getting richer. The poor are getting poorer. It's more magnified when we look at the whole globe. Nations like the U.S. are incredibly privileged compared to underdeveloped nations.

Unfortunately, we don't get a play-by-play of all the things this guy did to be dishonest. We hear that he squandered the rich man's money, which gives us a hint. That is the same underlying word that is used in the parable of the prodigal son right beforehand. I suspect that is not a mistake – so he was likely spending money frivolously and unwisely, in ways that were not faithful to the rich man's intentions.



So the rich man summoned him and called him to task. “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” (*Lk 16:2*) It’s time for him to shape up quickly and get his act together. He heard this as a wake up call – he was about to be jobless and he needed to have a backup plan. If he lived today, he would have been tempted to negotiate for a golden parachute.

Instead, the manager used his remaining authority to serve his own self-interest. He used his short-lived power to forgive some debt of the rich man’s debtors. This act of grace would put these people in his debt. After he lost his job, he would have a place to go, and people who would welcome him.

The dishonest manager acted out of fearful self-interest. Yet even in his selfishness, his actions reflected the ways of Christ. The manager used his short-lived power to lift the lowly, and to generously forgive the debts of those who were not worthy. The gospel of Luke keeps reminding us that God’s kingdom is a bit like looking in a funhouse mirror – though I have no clue if funhouses exist any more these days. Look in those mirrors and the tall become short, and vice versa, the thin become portly. It’s all a game – we are the tall or portly people that we knew we were. God’s kingdom mirror reveals that the poor are the richest among us, and the forgotten are the most cherished. In it, we see that the dirty, smelly homeless man on the corner, whom we might fear, is the most virtuous, honored celebrity among us.

The manager was only being selfish. But despite his bad motives, his actions were filled with forgiveness and grace and honor, as the ways of God are. He used

the rich man's money as a tool to tend his relationships with the powerless and forgotten ones of the story. The manager did not let money determine his choices. He did not worship money as a god. Instead, it served as a tool in service to other goals – God's goals, that he unknowingly contributed to. As the children's sermon said, if these selfish people can forgive even when it involves big things like money, why can't we?



We, too, will all be called to account for the ways that we have been stewards of our lives, just as the manager need to do. God will consider, how did we manage the money with which we are entrusted fits into that evaluation. Did we worship money as god, as we are all tempted to do in our consumer-driven society? That happens regardless of the total of our bank accounts or our debt load. Have we been thoughtful and wise about how we used our money? Have we managed our money with our eyes toward the kingdom of God – which means using it generously to lift the lowly and share God's grace with others?

We all know that Emanuel's is in a money pickle. We are not in a position of power like either the rich man, or the manager. There is no magic solution that will make the headache go away. I don't know how things have been before this time. From what I hear, it wasn't so much that squandering happened. But, in recent years we have not been shrewd – not wise or thoughtful – with our money. We failed to plan for this time when we looked forward to our congregation's future.

So now our master is holding us accountable. The ministry of Emanuel's needs to change in order for us to be faithful stewards of all that we have been given. God calls us to respond to the situation with quick wisdom and

thoughtfulness. Like the manager, we have some power, but not a lot. We wish that we could be relieved from our money problems.

With what we have, how can our congregation, including all its resources of money and people and things, be best used to share God's grace with the world? How can even we help to lift the lowly, cherish the forgotten, and forgive overwhelmed debtors? How can we reach out with love to the world around us?

Our congregation's mission, and the mission of each of us, is to reflect these values of wonderful reversal to the world. We are to help remind ourselves and the world about who we are as humans: beloved and forgiven creatures of God, cherished and loved regardless of our bank accounts or our jobs or our ages. We are people, who are called to live in relationships of justice and peace, forgiveness and generosity.

I hope that you all are continuing to pray about the future of Emanuel's. But our prayers need to be more than prayers about "keeping the church doors open" or "getting enough money" for some goal. Through the word, God invites us to pray that we may be thoughtful and wise managers, who share God's kingdom in our world today. Countless congregations have been where we are right now – having difficulty shouldering the costs of both physical plant and staffing. This range of congregations has made difficult and very different decisions as they sought to follow God's call. Congregations have moved to share a building with others; they have changed their ministry staffing, as we are exploring; they have dissolved their congregations; they have welcomed the community into their space and ministries in transformational ways. I'm sure there are more options, too. We have choices for how we can be good stewards of all that we have, though it is hard to be in this place.

In one month, Saturday, October 16th, Emanuel's will have a dinner when we can gather, as a congregation, with our friends. Together we will celebrate the ways that Christ's Spirit has gathered this community and has blessed us and the world through it. We will give thanks with food and song and levity. Perhaps most importantly, we will ponder God's call for us all, and the possibilities for our future in ministry. This will be an important evening for our church family. More information will be in next week's bulletin, and in the October newsletter. Please come and be a part of discerning God's call to us. Participate in choosing Emmanuel's future.

Jesus' parable reveals to us a glimpse of what our lives can be, with God's blessing and help. Even in our world of injustice and mixed motives, we can be thoughtful, generous stewards who forgive, and bless, and raise up the lowly. Gracious God, please show us the way.