

“Shrewd”

*25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 16:1-13 Proper 20 C*

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, meet us in these moments, set apart from the hectic pace of the world. Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that we may hear the word you have for us this day. Amen.

The Washington Post reports that it's been a "terrible, horrible, not-good, very bad week!" Well, of course! It is the political season for goodness sake, and in the 24/7 news business you could cast that description on a lot of things. ...but this week it's about the finance giant Wells Fargo. This story caught my attention, mainly because I was thinking about our faithful and unfaithful relationships to money.

Wells Fargo Bank was fined \$185 million dollars in penalties after employees, "in effect, put money before customers. Subject to aggressive sales goals some two million deposit and credit card accounts opened by Wells Fargo workers may have been unauthorized, created without customers' knowledge and often racking up fees or other charges," according to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.¹

Federal prosecutors have launched an investigation into company sales tactics. The bank's stock has dropped 9%; their

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2016/09/16/wells-fargos-terrible-horrible-no-good-very-bad-week/>

CEO has been called to testify on Capitol Hill before the Senate Banking Committee, and 5,300 (fifty-three hundred) employees have been fired for their involvement.

This past Tuesday Wells Fargo CFO John Shrewsberry (SHREWS-Berry) appeared to blame employees for the unauthorized accounts, saying “it was really more at the lower end of the performance scale, where people were making bad choices to hang onto their jobs.” (See www.CNBC.com).

When interviewed, Maurice Schweitzer, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School who studies ethical decision-making, said, “There are not 5,000 bad apples. In any company, when everybody to your left and right is turning in numbers you can't possibly reach without cheating, and everybody's getting rewarded for it, and your leadership's basically telling you to turn in those numbers -- it takes a very unusual person to blow the whistle or not fall into that pattern.”²

In this day and age, what will it take to move up the corporate ladder? What will it take?

² Washington Post Article. 9/8/2016

I would have to agree with the author of that *Post* article, it is a “**Terrible, Horrible, Not-Good, Very Bad Week.**” Which is why I am cautious of this solicitation which I found in the mail this week for a Wells Fargo Bank visa card. While more investigation is needed, it does appear to some that this is part of the financial culture, or the way the world works for them.

Transition to today’s gospel text. It’s a fast paced, twist and turn parable that should have “**enter this parable at your own risk**” as its chapter title.

It’s about an employer and his employee. If you look it up in **Luke’s gospel you’ll find it smack in between a story about a father and his sons and a story about a rich man and a beggar.** Each of these stories draws a contrast between how we suppose the world works with how Jesus portrays things working under the reign of God.

On one side, the spendthrift, disreputable son (15:21) plans to **come back as a “hired hand,”** but his father welcomes him and celebrates his return.

Then, on the other side of today’s lesson, we find the story of a comfortable rich man (Lk. 16: 19-31). Well dressed, and well fed, **he’s got it made** – in contrast to the poor man, Lazarus,

who's got nothing except the dogs to lick his sores. The conventional wisdom has it that the rich will of course get richer while the poor get poorer. But the ironic outcome of this story is that the mighty are brought low and those of low estate are lifted up.

Like the prodigal and the rich man, the manager finds himself in a considerable jam. He's been discovered "squandering" his boss's property. While it's not clear exactly what the manager did, whatever he did was enough to get him fired. The boss tells him to turn in a final report and then take a hike.

But interestingly enough, the manager now wastes his boss' money a second time. Like the prodigal and the rich man, in Jesus' other two stories, the manager is looking for a way to make his future better by wheeling and dealing in the present. Why? Because that's the way the world is thought to work: the ends justify the means. So in hopes of providing a "soft landing" for himself as he gets the boot, this manager allows debtors to square their accounts with only partial payments. This way, he figures, there will still be folks who will have him over for dinner and put him up for the night when he loses his job. It's underhanded. It's manipulative. It's wrong. And, it's shrewd.

The dishonest manager is hardly a likeable character. He comes across as shady, shifty and self-serving. At the very least this manipulating manager seems an unlikely candidate to be selected as “manager of the year.”

First-century culture was organized and orchestrated by strict social rules. The rules of reciprocal hospitality were not optional. Rather they were the supporting fibers that knit together status and honor, safeguarding roles and responsibilities through right relationships. The dishonest manager has no doubts that he will be able to collect on the favors owed him when the time comes. He will get by, despite his looming unemployment, because he knows how to work the system.³

Jesus doesn't admire the manager's dubious situation. Jesus does not concern himself with the man's self-serving character.

What Jesus focuses on is what results from the manager's shrewdness or what we might call “working the system.” The commentary Jesus offers after this story (vv9-13) is as central to this parable as the debt-forgiving details.

³ I am indebted to Rev. Dr. Emlyn Ott and my sermon group for the formation of this sermon.

Jesus focuses on the effective use of worldly, dishonest wealth, not for money-making, but for relationship building and hospitality. The manager accepts a reduced return on investment for his boss in order to establish and cement relationships, relationships that his society would not ordinarily embrace.

Jesus reminds his disciples, to whom he addresses this parable that the kingdom **isn't about** bean counting, the kingdom is about recreating our relationship with God and recreating our relationship with each other.

The son, the rich man, the dishonest manager make their mark. As their actions bring the reality of the kingdom closer, their lives open up to reveal God's power at work within them.

So whatever does this have to do with us today?

Maybe we're the one climbing the corporate ladder? Working your way up through the firm? Finding our way in a challenging work force with others who are beating the system a dishonest way. Maybe we are stuck in the superficial **relationships that don't enhance meaning or value to our lives.** Maybe we are too quick to judge and be the jury. Maybe we are caught idolizing, the celebrities of our day with their wealth

and style. Closer to home, we get caught idolizing the people we think have it all put together.

How does this make us look at our relationships, our community, and our world and wonder if they are worthwhile relationships in which to invest?

Jesus' parables challenge us to go beyond our first impressions. They make us long for the grace-filled messages that are all wrapped up in our complicated lives.

The Gospel is about a lifelong relationship with God through the One who shows us the way to live-giving relationships. **The Gospel message is about what's on the inside, not necessarily what things look like from the outside.**

What happens when we are filled with such a relationship with God?

We start looking differently at the people and situations that are in front of us. We begin reaching out to feed the hungry and work for justice. We begin following the Spirit and entering the work to which God calls.

We begin yearning for and seeking collaborative conversations and team building, for community events that continue to bring us together, instead of dividing us.

Jesus reminds his disciples, and today Jesus reminds us that the kingdom is about recreating our relationship with God and recreating our relationship with each other.

This week in Columbus could be called a terrible, horrible, not-good, very bad week. Wednesday, just blocks from here in Old Towne East, 13 year old, Tyre (TY-REE) King, was killed. A police officer was involved and the investigation by the Columbus Police Department is ongoing. On Friday, I went to a faith leaders meeting, where Mayor Ginther and Police Chief Kim Jacobs updated over 75 (seventy-five) members in the Columbus faith community. These community members **gathered to pray for both Tyre's family and Bryan Mason**, the officer involved in the shooting, Bryan Mason. They ask us to continue to share with our congregations the ongoing efforts of this city and its officials to be transparent and engaged with the community. As people of faith we mourn with those who mourn and weep with those who weep, but we also will work for courageous and faithful conversations to happen in our community. Conversations that will bring about peace and hope for our city. That relationship is about re-creation. That is kingdom work.

We also must engage in the work to end to gun violence and youth violence in our community. Later this fall, as promised, Adult Faith Formation classes will take a look at Gun Violence,

educating ourselves and engaging with our community and advocating for curbing its violent and deadly effects that ripple through this community and our nation. That is kingdom work.

The power of God is at work in this text today, even in the person of the dishonest manager. The work of the Spirit is alive and well in this place and in each one of us. The Spirit is **always working to engage us in God's work in us, in this church and in our community—this is kingdom work---** building the community that God entrusts to our care.

May it be so.

Amen.

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