

IN NOMINE JESU

The shrewd steward deconstructed

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The text for our meditation this morning is the Gospel according to Luke in the sixteenth chapter, the so-called “Parable of the Unrighteous Steward:”

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”¹

Those of us “doers” of the One Year Historic lectionary have the great pleasure of hearing these words of Jesus read once a year every year. Perhaps our Fathers in the Faith, after being pestered to give a “stewardship sermon,” instead gave a slight smile as they chose this text for Trinity Nine. No doubt the parable is difficult to understand. If it makes you feel better, you’re not alone in your endeavor to understand its meaning, because it just so happens that the parable doesn’t seem to make a whole lot of sense. Think about it. A bad employee squanders his boss’s possessions, gets caught, deceives his boss again, and then ends up getting a pat on the back. It sounds like a story you’d hear bragged about at the bar, not a parable from the mouth of God Incarnate.

But I’d like you to consider that with respect to the parables of Jesus, there is always an element of understanding and one of challenge. Those who know a little bit about farming might relate to the Parable of the Sower who throws the seed of the Word to all people in all places. Yet, something might make you cringe a bit to think about a farmer carelessly chucking seeds even if they fall on bad soil. My dad would have given me a stern talking to if he found out I was wasting his precious seeds on planting the gravel driveway. Something just doesn’t sound right.

Or what about the parable of the man who finds a treasure in a field and sells all he has to deceptively buy it. So wait a second, I understand the story, but is God comparing Himself to a deceiver? Or consider even the well-known parable of the Prodigal Son. We hear of the Father’s forgiving of the son and us Christians say, “*Yes, this is how it works.*” But that a Father gives His son back the credit card after he ripped through his bank account on booze and prostitution just doesn’t seem right at all. Something seems off to us.

¹ Luke 16:9

And so, even amidst the interpretive challenge, a task only accomplished through the Holy Spirit, we can still understand our parable for today on the surface. The master commends the steward for his shrewdness even though the shrewdness was carried out in the deception of “creative bookkeeping.” Those of us who grew up with siblings know that after being on the receiving end of a well thought out prank, despite it being at your expense, sometimes you can’t help but give credit to the conniving pranker for his skill. But still, something just seems a little bit off. It doesn’t sound right that the unrighteous steward gets away with his deception—let alone that the story would come from Jesus. Here, as we Lutherans say, we must let Scripture interpret Scripture. The key to the parable then is in Jesus’ own words immediately following it:

“For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.”²

So, this parable shows forth the truth that the sons of this world are often more zealous in acquiring wealth for themselves than Christians are zealous in the exercising of their faith. And so Christ would have that we Christians are to be as shrewd in good works as the sons of this world are in works of evil. First things first though, before we keep using the word “shrewd” a proper defining of terms is necessary. The word “shrewd” has somewhat fallen out of use in the English vocabulary. To use an earlier example, I don’t call my prankster brother a “shrewd guy” for conniving at my expense. On the surface, it just means “understanding associated with insight and wisdom.” To be shrewd, then, is to be sensible, to be prudent, to be wise.

However, in the Scriptures, a word study will show that shrewdness often comes up in texts that pertain to Eschatology – or to the End Times. Notably, in Matthew 25, the End Times discourse, Jesus tells a parable about five foolish virgins and five shrewd ones. So, in the context of Scripture, sons of God are shrewd when they act as if Jesus is coming again. Meaning, shrewdness for Christians ultimately relates to that Day when Christ will come in glory to Judge the quick and the dead. It means “acting in anticipation of the End result.” Christ here teaches that Christians should act in the present in wisdom and mercy, especially with monetary gifts God gives them, knowing that the Lord will return to go over their books. This is what Jesus was teaching his disciples and the Pharisees who were eavesdropping in the parable. The focus of Christian shrewdness is action in the now that points to an eternal reality.

² Luke 16:8

That there is a so-called “timely focus” to shrewdness is true even from the world’s understanding. The steward picks this up when he makes the debtor “*sit down quickly and write fifty.*”³ Evil will only be allowed to persist for so long, so those who love this present evil age must get their sinning done as fast as they can. You see, for the world, shrewdness means someone is clever in his own pursuits, loving one’s own life instead of losing it for Christ’s sake.

By the way of the world, a shrewd man is wise in looking out for “No. 1.” And just like the steward in the parable, we sinners are good at it. When the steward’s back is against the wall because of his squandering of the master’s riches he says,

*“What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.”*⁴

Caught in his own mismanagement he goes to work—not honest or deserved work, but deceptive work. The steward plans harder and ends up being more skilled in his deception than he ever was with just managing the books correctly to begin with! His original selfish misconduct leads to more selfish misconduct:

*“I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.”*⁵

And so, the steward lessens the debt of the master’s subjects so that when the master fires the steward, the steward has some people who now owe him favors. Instead of owning up to his crime, serving his punishment, he decides to serve his own mammon driven interests and make a nice little nest age for the upcoming years. Jesus in this parable tells us that sinners are zealous in their own sinful pursuits to the point of being an example for Christian stewardship.

And it’s true, isn’t it? For how often do you daydream about the “what-ifs” of your life, wishing you won the lottery or mentally prepping for the next time you’ll eat out at a nice restaurant? How much time do you spend wishing you had your neighbor’s possessions or bickering over money all instead of meditating on the Word of God and performing acts of mercy? Do you spend as much time planning-out your giving as you do planning-out your next vacation? How many children make a list of all the things they want to give away come their Birthday instead of the things they want to receive? Imagine if the steward was as shrewd in his

³ Luke 16:6

⁴ Luke 16:3

⁵ Luke 16:4

stewardship as he was in his deception.... If he was as skilled at serving his master as he was at serving his own interests. Imagine if you spent as much time working on doing good for your neighbor as you do looking out for yourself. Imagine if you sought out to make friends in Christ like you seek out friends for favors. We can all learn something from the shrewdness of sinners. And that is what Jesus is saying to us today in those words of conviction:

“the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.”⁶

Be warned, and repent, for as Jesus says,

“If you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches?”⁷

The reality is, you cannot serve two masters. If you live your life in service to yourself, making an idol out of money, you cannot serve God also. Daydreams and plans for accumulating more money will only end consuming your time spent focusing on the things of heaven. If you only think about your earthly home you will inevitably forget about your eternal one. And so Jesus says, be as zealous at being a servant to God as the sons of this age are towards serving mammon.

You know, the great irony in all of this is that, although we often claim to not fully understand this parable, it is the Pharisees who end up picking it up pretty clearly—and that should tell us something. The few verses after our text today in Luke’s Gospel indicate that,

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him.⁸

The Pharisees hate what Jesus is saying because Christ rightly divides the Law and the Gospel. He comes down with the hammer of the law on sinful money lovers and crushes them dead. But he also shows in the parable the full sweetness of the Gospel. And the aggravating component for the Pharisees is that the Kingdom of God in this text, the Gospel, looks like thievery. It looks like people getting stuff they don’t deserve, and that’s exactly what it is! As it was with the prodigal son, the sower sowing the seed, and the man finding treasure in the field, the way God works isn’t what works righteous sinners expect. The unrighteous steward deserved to be thrown in prison, but instead he gets praised. Sinners, the lovers of money that they are,

⁶ Luke 16:8

⁷ Luke 16:11

⁸ Luke 16:14

deserve to be cast out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, but Jesus commends true shrewdness. Shrewdness not in evil, but shrewdness in mercy.

This is the way God works. Some of you might recall that in the Gospel of Mark Jesus is always doing things immediately. He entered the synagogue and immediately was teaching.⁹ Immediately he made his disciples get into a boat.¹⁰ The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.¹¹ The earthy ministry of Jesus was always shrewd in that Jesus acted in anticipation of what was to come—His death and resurrection.

How Christ served God and not mammon was shown forth in the shrewd quickness by which He worked, and still works, to give away the Kingdom. He healed freely from place to place, taught freely from place to place, offered the free grace of God to all people. He shrewdly ministered to the lost sheep knowing their immediate need for mercy.

And in this our faithful Steward Jesus Christ showed what the Kingdom of God looks like. It looks like God being merciful to self-centered stewards who squander away their gifts. It looks like a steward canceling debt. It looks like Christ crucified for you—Christ nailed to a tree pouring out his very life to cancel your debt of sin. The reign of God is shown forth in Jesus Christ offering himself into death that we might be called his own.

As our Introit for today declares,

*Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life... O God, save me by Your name, and vindicate me by Your might.*¹²

Through the vindicating stewardship of Jesus, under his management of God's grace, he dies not to cut the cost of your sin by half, not even to put you back to even. He dies to give you a surplus of grace and forgiveness. He dies to vindicate you from the great debt of sin. And no, to the ears of ones so used to a world in which you get what you have coming, this doesn't sound right at all.

To the ears of ones who know they are deep down lovers of money, this just doesn't seem right. To hear the words, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all of your sins,"¹³ after just listing out your disobedience to your Master doesn't seem right. It sounds like God commending you though you deserve to be thrown in prison. It sounds like a

⁹ Mark 1:21

¹⁰ Mark 6:45

¹¹ Mark 1:12

¹² Psalm 54:1,4

¹³ *Lutheran Service Book*, Individual Confession and Absolution, p293.

merciful Master commending an unrighteous steward. But that is how the Kingdom of God works because that is how Jesus Christ carries out his stewardship of the Father's grace. He does so in true shrewdness, he just gives it away.

And so, we thus learn from the stewardship of Jesus what true shrewdness looks like. Having received the cancellation of our debt, having received the greater treasure of the kingdom, we are taught to be as shrewd in our giving as we once were in our sinning. Through such giving, as Christ has made us eternal friends and more by his atoning blood, we

“make friends for ourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive us into the eternal dwellings.”¹⁴

In the giving away of the wealth we so often wrongfully hoard, wealth that will soon be gone in death, that is unrighteous wealth, we show forth faith in Christ and point others to the merciful stewardship of Jesus. By acting in faith of God's mercy you Christians make friends in faith. Parents who give freely to their children teach them the stewardship of Christ. Married couples who make sacrifices for one another show forth the stewardship of Christ. Churches who provide for their pastors and one another show for the stewardship of Christ. Through this stewardship you Christians make heavenly friends. Even today, as you kneel at the rail, you do so received by both the open arms of Christ and the all the faithful who have fallen asleep in the Lord. Your loved ones wait at the rail this very day, with all the company of heaven, to receive you in the friendship of this Altar. All who commune today in faith are received by each other as true friends.

And on the Last Day, when your Master returns, He will ask to see the log of your stewardship; and in that book will be inscribed in the blood of Jesus a faithful account of Christ's own vindication of you. So, though you may know of your own poor stewardship, all of you who in true shrewdness received and believed in the mercy of the Father will hear the words from your truest friend Jesus Christ, *“well done good and faithful steward.”¹⁵* So like our parable, though it may not seem right, this is the way that God works. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all human understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹⁴ Luke 16:9

¹⁵ Matthew 25:21

Trinity IX

Proverbs 16:1-9, I Corinthians 10: 6-13, Luke 16:1-13

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