

A shift toward relationship

Luke 16:1-9 (September 18, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

I've been preaching from the lectionary these past few weeks, as some of you may know. The lectionary provides a schedule of readings that many churches follow. There are advantages to this – one of them being that we hear a variety of scriptures, not just the preacher's favourites. We get to listen to the whole witness of scripture.

But some of these passages can be challenging! When I discovered this morning's Gospel reading, my heart sank. Oh no, I thought, what am I going to do with this? How does a parable about a dishonest manager fit with what we're doing here today? What does this story even mean?

There is a common misunderstanding about parables. Some say Jesus told them to make his message simple. But sometimes these stories are *not* simple at all. Instead they make us think, and cause us to probe more deeply. They often have an unexpected twist or turn.



Our parable this morning begins with a rich property owner and some tenants, who were required to pay rent – typically, a portion of the harvest. It was the manager's job to oversee these payments. In our story he is accused of “squandering” the master's wealth. So the rich man calls him into the office and fires him. “Hand over the accounts, then you're done.”

This throws the manager into a crisis. He's lost his job. What will he do? He considers a variety of options, but soon dismisses them. He's not strong enough to dig. He's too ashamed to beg. The manager's misfortune has revealed a gaping hole in his life. He's spent all this time working for a master who demands more and more wealth.



Is money the goal of our living? No! Of course not. Yet how often do we get caught up in a system that becomes ever more demanding, serving a master who doesn't care? A snap of the finger and this manager is cast out into the street.

The manager realizes that he has very few friends he can depend on. “Who will take me in?” he asks. Certainly not the tenants who have been living at a subsistence level while others have prospered from their labour.

Life is not about the amassing of wealth. But you know that. Life is about living in right-relationship with God and others.



What will the manager do to secure his precarious future? He devises a plan. One by one he calls in those impoverished tenant farmers and writes off a portion of what they owe. A hundred jugs of olive oil? “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.”

It's quite a scheme isn't it? It's also brilliant! Because every one of those poor indebted folk are given a break. One that will relieve their burden and allow them to breathe more freely. Even more importantly, it changes their relationship with the manager.

Have a look at this painting. What do you see?

The manager is sitting at the table, examining the tenant's bill. He's not a young man, is he? Never before has he marked bills *down* or told his clients to pay him *less*. Look at the expression on his face. There is kindness there, don't you think? This is a willing act of, well ... forgiveness.

"Forgive us our debts," said Jesus, when teaching his disciples how to pray, "as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matt. 6:12) We don't always take Jesus' words quite so literally though, do we? Think of the chaos we'd be unleashing into our economic system.



Now look at the tenant, the one standing behind the manager, peering over his shoulder. What do you see there?

Is he surprised, amazed? Puzzled, confused? Is there a hint, just a hint, of a smile on his face?

"What do you owe? If it's 100 jugs of olive oil, mark it down to 50. If it's 100 containers of wheat, let's make it 80."

The manager is in the process of making a *friend*! And while we may not approve, exactly, of how he's tinkering with the accounts (no, there's something not quite right about that) we have to agree with the master, who commended his manager for acting shrewdly.

"For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light," said Jesus.



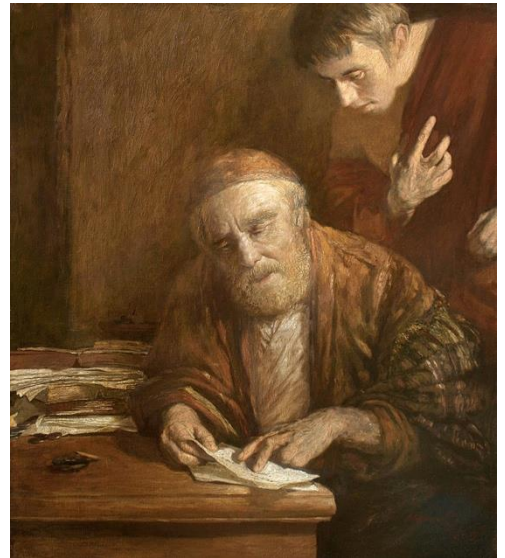
I told you it was a challenging parable! We don't usually imagine "shrewdness" as a Christian character trait. Is it our goal in life to be a wheeler-dealer like this fellow seems to be? Maybe not.

But here's something we can all learn from the story. This manager has made a shift. He's learned something that is *crucial* for our lives, and crucial for the realm of God.

He's turned his attention away from the accumulation of wealth – toward something else. His concern now is to build *relationship*. Why, if he goes on like this, the whole countryside will love him. When the master throws him out, there will be an entire community to take him in!

Up till now, he's served only the interests of an absentee landlord. That loyalty had impoverished his neighbours and made him a pariah. As long as he serves that miserly rich man he cannot be his neighbour's friend. But now as he turns away from his former master, he seeks to bless the lives of others.

"You cannot serve both God and money," Jesus said. You have to choose where your values lie.



Do you see it? This man is shifting toward the Kingdom. He has much to learn, I think. But he's heading in the right direction now: toward love for God and neighbour. He's turning from exploitation to fairness; from isolation to solidarity; from division to community. If you ask me, we need more like him in the world in which we live.



Can *our* lives be a blessing to others? There's so much strife and hostility in the world right now. But disciples of Jesus can offer a sign of something different.

Whenever we step outside our comfort zone to make friends with others we are taking one step closer to living God's way. Sarah is going overseas. But *all* of us can do this every day, wherever we are planted.



We can take what we have – our skills and abilities, our kindness and care for others, our curiosity about other people and ways of being, our willingness to learn, our desire for *relationship* (real, honest, loving relationship) – we can take these things and offer them to the One who made us all.



Relationships that honour God bring *mutual* blessing. I'm not talking about relationships that flow in direction only. In first century Palestine wealth was not shared equitably. Only a few were landowners. Most of the people who did the work struggled to survive. It was not a relationship of mutual blessing.

But when the manager in our story begins to make that shift toward relationship, everything changes. The tenants get a break. The manager is reunited with his neighbours. Even the landowner can't help but be pleased, for now he has received some of his payments. When we turn toward relationship everyone wins! The world becomes a kinder place. And we discover there is abundance for all.



Sometimes we reach out to another person thinking *we* will be the givers and *they* will receive. But in my experience, it's more of a two-way street. It's a reciprocal relationship, where the blessing I receive often seems far greater than anything I've been able to give.



As a Pastor, I go on a visit to encourage somebody, and come away finding that I myself have been refreshed. I go to pray for them, and discover that God's presence is revealed to me. I go to offer advice, but am humbled to find that I have so much to learn, and that the wisdom I receive from that encounter with a fellow child of God, is far greater.

Sarah is going to Thailand. And we can see that she has many gifts to offer! We pray that God will make her presence there a great blessing – to the school children, to her friends and colleagues, and to all sorts of people she has yet to meet.

But in real relationships, blessings flow *both* ways. And I can guarantee that Sarah will return a changed person! What she receives will be just as great, and probably greater, than anything she's been able to give them. That's the way God's kingdom works. We are always being called into relationships of mutual blessing!



We are placed on earth to love and care for one another. It's such a basic thing, which we still strive to learn. It was Augustine, I think, who once said "God gives us people to love, and things to use." But we keep mixing them up, loving things and using people.¹

Jesus calls us into communities of mutual care and blessing. It's exactly what he intended when he called his disciples. And when his followers through the ages have formed themselves into churches. And when churches have reached out to one another to strengthen their bonds and embark on great adventures they cannot undertake alone. It is why we still reach out toward our neighbours, near and far: here in Saskatoon, and far away in Thailand.

We all need to make this shift toward relationship. In our Gospel reading today, the manager took a step *toward* that. But he still had much to learn. Much of what he did, and his motivation for doing it, was still self-serving. He's not exactly a shining example.

And yet ... in *this* way he is: He turns toward his neighbours, and strives to call them friends. May it be so for us as well!

¹ David Lose, "In the meantime ..." [Pentecost 18 C: Wealth and Relationships | ...In the Meantime \(davidlose.net\)](https://www.davidlose.net/2022/09/16/pentecost-18-c-wealth-and-relationships-in-the-meantime/) Accessed Sept. 16, 2022.