

Sept. 22, 2019

Luke 16: 1-13

Prayer: Dear Lord, We take seriously your promise that where two or three are gathered in your name, you are there also. We delight in the fact that you join us for worship. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

There was a rich man...

There was a rich man.

There was a rich man.

How many stories start out this way?

Here's a true one: There was a rich man who supported Triune Mercy Center in the hometown where he made his fortune. He gave money to build two bathrooms on the ground floor — between the kitchen and the social work offices.

They were two of the only bathrooms open to homeless people on weekends. Volunteers kept the bathrooms clean and shining.

On a cold Sunday before Christmas one year, the rich man dressed in old clothes and a ratty sweater and a misshapen fishing hat. When he came into the Triune dining hall at dinner time, the pastor hardly recognized him.

“Shhh...” he told her. “I don’t want anyone to know who I am.”

He proceeded to hand out \$20 bills. And there was almost a riot.

The next Christmas the mean ol’ pastor said to him, “That was a very generous thing you did last year. Let’s not do it again.”

And for the next three Christmases, the diners in the Triune dining hall asked, “Hey, when’s that rich dude coming back?”

The End.

There was a rich man.

The gospel writer Luke had a thing about rich men. He saw riches as an impediment to following the gospel. And so with just about every story he told about the life of Jesus, he inserted something about the dangers of wealth.

In Luke’s telling, even before Jesus was born, his mother Mary sang, **“(God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”**

(Luke 1: 52-53)

When John the Baptist came on the scene to preach about the coming of Jesus, the crowds asked him what they should do. *Share your coat with someone*

who doesn't have one, he ordered. Collect taxes fairly. Don't cheat. (Luke 3: 10-14)

At Jesus' first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, he preached from the prophet Isaiah: **“The Spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”** (Isaiah 61: 1-2; Luke 4: 18)

Luke was relentless in pounding home his storyline of a Jesus who was concerned for the poor and skeptical of the rich. In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus said, **“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”** (Luke 6: 20) **“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”** (v. 24)

Then there was the parable of the rich fool we talked about recently. The rich man had so many crops that he planned to tear down his barns and build more storage. But God ended his life that very night.

In that story, we get an inkling of why Luke was so prejudiced against the rich. God called the rich man “a fool.” And in Psalm 14, we read: **“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ ”**

So apparently, that's the source of all these warnings against wealth – that it is woven into a denial of God. In Luke's view, riches blind one to the need for God.

Luke followed the parable of the rich fool with some instructions Jesus gave his disciples: **“Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven....”** (12: 33)

Against this extended backdrop of anti-rich themes comes one of the most difficult parables in all of Scripture. It seems upside down. It seems to say that crime pays.

There was a rich man....

I have to admit that this is a hard passage for me to understand. I think it has been misinterpreted. But I'm not sure my reading of it is any better. Please turn in your Bibles to **Luke 16: 1-8**, and let's read this parable together:

Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ²So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account

of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.”

³Then the manager said to himself, “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.”

⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” ⁶He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.”

⁷Then he asked another, “And how much do you owe?” He replied, “A hundred containers of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill and make it eighty.”

⁸And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

We're going to pause here for a moment, because this is where the parable ends. What are we to make of this?

Does shrewdness make dishonesty all right? So if you're good enough at being crooked, you deserve to get away with it?

Whatever happened to the 8th Commandment: *You shall not steal?*

Some people have tried to explain this parable by saying that the manager simply gave up his commission by lowering the price by 50 jugs of olive oil and 20 containers of wheat. That *was* shrewd because he made friends for himself who would presumably help him later. Well, maybe.

But that doesn't explain that word "dishonest."

The manager was dishonest.

And yet the rich man commends him for his shrewdness. And Jesus seems to add an admiring editorial comment: **"... for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."**

Many commentators interpret this parable to mean that one should do anything, anything at all, to enter the kingdom of God. They look back to Jesus' words in chapter 12: **"Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth**

destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (12: 33-34)

In this view, the dishonest manager has built relationships that will serve him. In the same way, we are to push aside possessions and focus on the relationships that will get us into the kingdom of God.

As one writer said, it’s a classic “how much more” parable. Do you remember this “how much more” saying by Jesus earlier in Luke’s gospel?

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask **him!” (Luke 11:11-13)**

So there is this idea that if even a shifty, dishonest, rascally, terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad manager can recognize that relationships are more important than riches, *how much more* should believers recognize it.

Again, maybe.

I'm not sure what to make of this parable. But I think it carries the same message that so many of Jesus' parables about riches did: A warning. *Take care that riches, success and power don't blind you to the need for God.*

And the key is not so much the dishonest manager. The key is the rich man.

There was a rich man....

In the parable of the dishonest manager, we usually read the rich man, the master, as God. And that is the problem. For if the rich man behaves as so many rich men do in Jesus' parables, then *he* is not God. He is the problem. So why should we be surprised when he applauds a dishonest action?

I would propose that this parable doesn't have a hero, doesn't have a God figure. The manager is flagrantly dishonest, and his rich master honors that dishonesty.

So while the master approves of the dishonest manager, the reader is not supposed to.

This interpretation makes the rich man like many others in Jesus' storytelling repertoire. Like the rich fool who builds barns but loses his life. Like the rich man who steps over poor, sick Lazarus and ends up in Hades. Like the rich young ruler who cannot give up his possessions.

This rich man may be OK with a dishonest manager. But we don't have to be. We can dismiss both of them as people behaving in ways antithetical to Jesus, abhorrent to God.

After the parable, Luke tacks on several sayings of Jesus about wealth. Some of them pertain to this parable. Some of them don't. Picking up at **Luke 16: 9-13:**

⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

¹⁰ 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?

¹³No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'

The fact that Luke tacks all these sayings about wealth onto the end of this parable gives us an inkling of how often Jesus talked about money. It was a recurring theme. For while verse 9 seems to have something to do with the parable, the following verses don't.

Verse 10 talks about honesty, and how honesty appears whether we are handling a little or a lot.

Verses 11 and 12 talk about trust.

Verse 13 talks about the impossibility of succumbing to greed AND serving God.

Like it or not, Jesus talked a lot about the dangers of wealth. Human nature pulls us one way. Service to the gospel pulls us another.

But here's the question: Who is this rich man today?

There was a rich man...

Do we hear that and picture Jeff Bezos (Bay zos) and Bill Gates and Warren Buffett and Mark Zuckerberg, our richest Americans? Or do we look at the question from a global perspective? According to a great part of the world, most of us in this room are rich.

Bobby Thompson is a friend of ours who sold drugs for 30 years. He became his own best customer and was homeless for the last six of those years. He ate his meals at Triune, and got groceries, clothes and toiletries here. He washed his clothes in our laundry room.

And he found the will to get clean in our NA meeting. Bobby has been clean for 13 years. He has a job, a wife and daughter, a home, a car. And he has gone on several mission trips to Haiti with our friends at Buncombe Street UMC.

After his second trip, he told me, “Even the homeless people in Greenville are rich by Haiti’s standards.”

Even the homeless people in Greenville are rich by Haiti’s standards.

There was a rich man ... and he was us. He was all of us.

How are we using those riches? How are we using our financial resources, obviously? But how, also, are we using the talents, the skills, the able bodies, the blessings God has given us?

Are we using them? Or are we throwing them away?

One of the most rewarding parts of this job is meeting people who are near the end of their careers and have decided they want to reach back and help someone. Before he died, the rich man who ceased handing out \$20 bills in our dining hall

gave us several donations of \$25,000 and \$50,000 to help run the ministry, to help hire our case managers and rehab managers and Triune Circles director. He was also generous with one of our partner agencies.

Years ago, Vince and I were friends with an older couple I can only describe as godly. Whenever I spoke about Ruth and Russell Ashmore, I'd say, "They're wealthy ... but you'd never know it."

What I meant was that they were unostentatious and down-to-earth. They lived in the same brick ranch they'd lived in for 40 years.

They were, however, generous with endowing buildings for their favorite university. They helped found the Taylors Free Medical Clinic. They gave away more money than I'll ever see in a lifetime.

But as far as their own lifestyle, they were modest and unassuming.

How would someone begin our story? I hope it might be:

There was a kind man.

There was a gracious woman.

There was a generous man.

There was a compassionate woman.

If it does begin *There was a rich man...*, let's be careful that's not all the story has to say.

Amen.