

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
September 18, 2022 – The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Luke 16:1-13  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

“There was a rich man.” In the parables of Jesus this is not a neutral statement. The term “rich man” carries meaning beyond a simple financial assessment. We are meant to understand that this man possesses wealth which he does not use to support the poor, and we are meant to hear Jesus’ criticism of that. This shouldn’t surprise us, given all the teaching in the Hebrew Bible about sharing with those in need.

So, today’s parable begins: “There was a rich man who had a manager,” a dishonest manager. The rich man is being cheated, so he decides to terminate his manager’s employment. Facing the end of his profitable position, the manager considers his options. “I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.” Would this man even think of stooping so low? Unlikely. Dishonesty has served him well so far, so why not try it again? He “fixes” the bills of his employer’s debtors, counting on being repaid when he loses his job and “people may welcome me into their homes.”

This is not a commendable cast of characters. A rich man who does not help the poor, a dishonest employee, and customers happy to collude with the manager’s scheme for their own gain. They are all shrewd, clever, selfish, and successful. They appreciate one another. What does Jesus think? It seems at first as if he is commending them. Speaking to his disciples Jesus says, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you” – but here is the crushing blow – “into the eternal homes.” The shrewd “children of this age” are anything but clever, for they have forgotten the eternal in their selfish pursuit of the temporal. They are not really shrewd, but foolish. In the words of the psalmist (14:1): “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds.”

This morning’s parable is famous. We refer to it now as the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. But you may know its title from the King James Version translation, the Parable of the Unjust Steward. The older title helps us see that this is a parable about stewardship. Right now we are stewards of God’s gifts, in the position to manage money and possessions, skills and abilities, relationships, and time. But we know that our job is temporary. We don’t know the exact date, but we do know that our last day of “employment” – of life on earth – will come. Jesus challenges us to think about how we will prepare for that day and for our eternal homes.

This week you should have received a letter from St. Columba’s vestry regarding your pledge to support the parish financially in 2023. This morning it is my “assignment” to preach to you about stewardship. If you’ve been an Episcopalian for a long time, you are familiar with the word “stewardship.” You know that it refers to this time of year when church members are asked to pledge money to the church for the coming year. If you’re not someone who has been in the Episcopal Church for a long time, you may find this word “stewardship” a bit peculiar and old-fashioned. Why not just say we’re doing fund raising? After all, on one level, that is exactly what we are doing. We need certain funds to run the church, and we must raise those funds primarily from the people in the church. If the church means something important to you and you want it to continue for your benefit and for the benefit of those who will come after you, then you will give money to support it. Just as you may support other organizations engaged in activities that you value. That’s fund raising, and it is good.

But stewardship is different. There is a good reason to keep this odd word for what we are doing. A steward is someone who manages another's property, finances, or other affairs. Another's. Not ours. Another's. That's the key word. And who is the other whose property we are managing? God.

Stewardship is about realizing that our lives, in a very important sense, belong to God. They are not exclusively our own. Our time, talent, and treasure are ours to manage for God. We believe that we will be accountable to God for what we do with what God has given us. A prayer "For the Right Use of God's Gifts" in the Book of Common Prayer (page 827) expresses this well: "Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

So, you see that "stewardship" is about an attitude to all of life. In this Season of Creation, we have been called to reflect specifically on our stewardship of God's creation. Now we are being called to reflect on our stewardship of the gift of Christ's body – the church. Good and faithful stewards recognize that they are managers, not owners. Good and faithful stewards look to God for direction about how to manage what they are entrusted to manage. They seek to honor the owner's wishes. And that is one very important reason why we come to church. To be reminded of what the owner desires us to do with what we have.

There is something else to think of when you prayerfully consider your support of this church. When we love someone, when our hearts are full of love, it is a joy to give to the one we love. We may "sacrifice" ourselves – our time, our talent, and our treasure – to help the person we love or to give that person happiness. When we give in this spirit, we "lose" nothing. In fact, our joy increases. Giving becomes a blessing both to the other person and to ourselves. You have experienced this often, I'm sure. Love.

In the Bible we read about people who gave of themselves generously to Jesus, for love. Think of the woman who poured an entire jar of costly ointment over Jesus' head while he sat at the table of Simon the leper (Matthew 26:6-13). When his disciples criticized her "wasteful" behavior, Jesus rebuked them and praised her for her good service to him. He reminded them that his time with them would soon be over. The woman took the opportunity she had to show her love for Jesus generously. Jesus is no longer with us in the body that the woman anointed. But he has promised to be with us when we gather in his Name. That is what we do, here, when we gather as Christ's body. Giving to the church is one way to show our love for Jesus.

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) Jesus teaches that when we give to people who are hungry and thirsty or in need of clothing, people who are strangers, and people who are sick or in prison, we are also giving to him. So, another way for us to show our love for Jesus is by serving those in need. That is part of what it means to be the church, and we try to embody Jesus' teaching here at St. Columba's, working together in service of others, showing our love for Jesus.

God created us, blessed us, and loves us with a limitless and steadfast love. God calls us to be thankful and to share our gifts, and to make the good news of Jesus Christ known to others. In the church we are called to be God's good and faithful stewards who do what we can, in the time given to us, for the love of God. Jesus reminds us that our eternal homes are with God. To prepare for our joyous homecoming, may we grow in love, and renew our commitment to serve God and seek God's kingdom above all else. In Jesus' name. Amen.