

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 21, 2025 – 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, reducing the amounts of their debts, 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 truly 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.”

Let me pause here for a moment to remind us that Jesus was human. He had a full human experience, including many feelings common to all of us. When you read the Gospels – and I would suggest that you read straight through one of the Gospels in large sections at home – when you read the Gospels, this is clear. I won’t cite chapter and verse, but we read in scripture that Jesus got tired and hungry, frightened, angry, frustrated and exasperated, that he could be bluntly confrontational, that he needed to get away from people and be on his own to pray, that he was compassionate and forgiving. There is no reason, I think, to suppose that Jesus wasn’t also sometimes cynical and sarcastic. That is what I read in this parable.

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. Being a steward means managing or caring for something valuable that has been entrusted to one’s care, acting as a responsible caretaker rather than an owner. Right now, we are stewards of God’s gifts, in the position to manage money and possessions, skills and abilities, relationships, time and everything given to us. 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.

In a few weeks you will receive a letter from St. Columba’s vestry regarding your pledge to support the parish financially in 2026, a “stewardship letter”. If you’ve been an Episcopalian

for a long time, you are familiar with the word “stewardship.” 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 say fundraising? 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, according to your means. Just as you may support other organizations that need money to continue their good work, that are engaged in activities you value. That’s fundraising, and it is good, vital to the survival of many charitable organizations.

But stewardship is different. There is a good reason to keep this odd word for what we are doing. Because 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 in the Book of Common Prayer (page 827), “For the Right Use of God’s Gifts,” 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. 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. We believe that God’s creation is good and that God wants us to care for creation, so we are called to do just that.

Another word about stewardship. This isn’t only about what we give of our time, talent, and treasure to support the church. We may support other charitable organizations as part of our own personal commitment to our overall stewardship of God’s gifts. Every one of us has limits to the resources we have that are available for giving. I think it is wise to examine our lives, take an honest look at what we support and how much we give, and possibly make some adjustments so that our giving is in better alignment with the will of God than it may be now. Are we actually supporting what we think is most valuable, most like what God desires? Are we wasting resources that might be better used? Who and what are we serving in our lives? Jesus puts the question in very stark terms: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” We cannot “serve two masters.” Jesus calls us to think differently than the world thinks, to be not shrewd and clever, but godly, authentic, “of one piece” as persons who love God. He calls us to ask ourselves if we are living in the way we believe God is calling us to live.

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.