“Using What You Have For What’s Most Important”

Luke 16:1-15

September 23rd, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Welcome to the annual parable award ceremonies. In our festivities, we try to recognize the outstanding performance of various parables in the different categories. You can hold your applause until the conclusion of the awards.

Our first category of parable awards is “The Most Agricultural.” Nominations were: the parable of The Seed Growing Secretly, the Parable of the Tares, the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Sower. *Isn’t this exciting?*

The winner is the Parable of the Sower for its all round use of metaphor about the gospel.

In the category of “Lostness Parables,” the nominees were: the parable of the rejoicing over the Finding of the One Lost Sheep out of 100, . . . the parable about finding one Lost Coin, . . . the parable of The Unforgiving Servant who was released of 10 million dollars but who couldn’t find it in his heart to forgive a twenty dollar debt, . . . and the Grudging Elder Brother parable.

The winner is the parable of The Unforgiving Servant.

Nominated for the category of The Most Widely Misinterpreted Parable were: the Separation of the Sheep From the Goats, . . . and the parable about the Grudging Elder Brother, (which is really about an older brother who was so self satisfied, that he actually became grumpy when his younger brother finally grew up and got his act together).

The winner is the parable of Grudging Elder Brother.

In the category of “Parables Most Aware of Management and Union Tensions,” there was only one nominee. This was the one about the farm workers who resented the late-arriving laborers who were paid an entire day’s wage for working only part of the day – even though their own remuneration was fair for their day’s work.

Finally, in the category of The Parable Most Difficult to Understand,” the nominations were: the Parable of the Leaven of the Pharisees, . . . the parable of The Unjust Judge, . . . and the parable of the Shrewd Business Manager.

And the winner is: the Parable of the Shrewd Business Manager.

The difficulty with this parable is that no one was pleased with the central character. he hero of the narrative was an M.B.A. business manager who was good, but in some areas of his management, extravagant. He probably made it a practice to ride first class in the cross-Palestine carts and he had three martini fish dinners with his clients. His subordinates, who were jockeying for his position in the corporate structure, claimed he was wasting company money.

When the president of the board of the agricultural conglomerate heard about it, he ordered an audit, and told this territorial business manager he had until the end of the month and then he was fired.

The manager saw he was soon going to be on the street so he had an idea. He knew that some of the tenant farmers were so far behind with their rent payments, they had little chance of paying the ongoing late fees and interest charges along with their quarterly rent. He said to himself: “If I could just figure so much on the dollar and get them to pay *something*, enabling them to get out of debt, they may be in a position to do me some good once I’m on the outside.” And that is what he did.

Near the end of the month he visited his indebted tenants, and gave them a deal which enabled them to pay 50 or 80 cents on the dollar. He cleared up all of the past due accounts and made a lot of friends in the process.

When the chair of the board looked at the quarterly audit, he realized the prudence of this business manager and sent him a telegram of congratulations. By this time, however, the manager had landed himself a position with another firm.

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Now this story, without the twenty-first century details I added, was told by Jesus and it was very possibly about a well known scandal of a real person in a large Palestinian farming operation. If anything, it shows the world's cynicism as it reflects the prevalent attitude which dictates rules in our culture: "always cover your bases," "keep your irons in a number of fires," "always keep your resume up to date" and "look out for number one."

What drives religious people to distraction is that this is a parable about how questionable business dealings are not only praised by management but are also used as an illustration by Jesus. The parable, however, is not about career survival regardless of ethics. It is not praising the less-than-ethical actions of the business manager. It points to the man's focus and creativity in using what he had for the sake of his future. The primary force of the story is about *urgency* – about *realizing the temporary nature of what we have and using it for the most long term good*.

Jesus made this same point on numerous occasions. He said, 'The kingdom of God is like this: A guy is walking along minding his own business and finds a hidden treasure in a field. He hides it again, goes back home and sells his house and everything he owns, putting all of his (now) liquid assets into the purchase of this one piece of land where he knows the treasure is hidden.'

Another time, Jesus told an identical parable about a merchant hocking everything he had in order to acquire a set of valuable pearls. This parable about the soon-to-be-fired manager is the same.

The man realizes that what is most important is not keeping his position or salary, because those things will soon disappear anyway. What *is* most important is his acceptance by others who will someday be in a position to help him. Keep in mind that Luke was the only gospel writer to include this text and his commentary is helpful in our understanding what Jesus had in mind.

In verse 9, Jesus says, 'Here it is – make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may receive you into the eternal homes.' But keep reading, . . . 'Because someone who holds it together in the little things will be reliable in the important things. The converse is also true. If you're dishonest in the little things, you're going to be just as unreliable in the matters of greater importance.'

But if we didn't keep reading to the next verse, for a minute we might be tempted to think that Jesus was suggesting we can buy our friendships with murky people – but this misses the point. Jesus was teaching that just like there are business people who are focused, creative and absolutely attentive in their careers – that same passionate driving focus is even more needed when it comes to matters of the kingdom of God. We shouldn't be mediocre and lackadaisical in our spiritual journey.

In conclusion, Jesus said, 'It all boils down to this: you can't serve God AND money.'

Now this parable is often interpreted and spun out as a lesson in traditional stewardship and support of one's church budget – but Luke, again, helps guide our understanding.

The Pharisees, Luke says, were listening to this story and because they were proud of their wealth, they scoffed at Jesus. In that religious subculture, in which the Pharisees lived and in the larger first century Palestinian society, it was thought that if a person is successful – it was evidence that they were good and were being blessed by God. Same thing in our culture, isn't it?

It appears that these prominent religious people, standing there listening to Jesus, were smug in their seemingly successful careers. Jesus told the Grudging Elder Brother and Lost Coin and Sheep parables to the same audience, (as Luke suggests), because His listeners were resentful when they heard that some down-and-out people had changed their life for the better and had gotten matters of their faith settled with Jesus' help.

Jesus bluntly told them, 'You get your kicks out of impressing people but God knows what is in your heart. Watch out, because what is

temporarily popular with people around you actually nauseates God.'

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As we work in putting this together, we discover that the real subject is *the tension between one standard of values about money and popularity as opposed to the values taught by the kingdom of God.*

When Jesus finished telling the story of the Crooked But Prudent Business Manager, He finished by saying, "The people of this age are wiser in their own generation than the children of light." He was comparing people in the business world to religious people. He was criticizing the Pharisees and others who had cloistered themselves off from society to avoid being around so-called "people of the world." Perhaps Luke was personally thinking about some of the overly religious and judgmental Christians at the end of the first century when he was writing this.

Jesus' advice was this: 'Look at people in the business world. Look at their creativity, assertiveness, imagination and drive in how they go after what is ultimately most important for their business. If you put half of that much of yourselves into your own spiritual journey, you'd be greatly successful in terms of God's kingdom. If you handled your money so as to use it for the poor, you would be reaping dividends in eternity.'

This is why Jesus said, "You can't serve God AND money." If you keep up with the Jones, you'll go bankrupt with God.

It wasn't a criticism of someone having a lot of money or being successful in business. It was a condemnation of the thinking that being successful in this world is what is most important in life.

What *is* most important, according to His teaching, is the *urgency* of using what we have for the highest priorities of God's kingdom – such as alleviating suffering and poverty.

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We know from reading Luke that Jesus' teachings about wealth and poverty are one of the most often repeated themes in his gospel. Luke told more unique stories and parables about rich people and poor people than the other gospel writers. Jesus said it like this, "If you give a cup of water in my name, it is the same as giving it to Me."

Just as the business manager urgently used what he had to make friends with business associates (who were on the outside of his corporation), God's people are called to intentionally and mindfully use their personal resources for the urgent work of God's kingdom. God is the champion of the poor and they are the folks who are going to be the honored greeters at the gates in the kingdom. So this parable, then, challenges us to reflect on what *we* consider to be most important in *our* lives.

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It is so easy to have our lives consumed by trying to establish our self worth through the possession of things or positions in organizations. Whether it was a PhD Pharisee two thousand years ago, a successful MBA vice president, or an officer in a local church, it is easy for us to be consumed with looking for our self worth in *things* other than the core of who we are as a person.

Jesus is telling us to simply put our attention and our resources into our spiritual journey. He is talking about investing ourselves, our time, attention and our money into the areas of the work of God's kingdom – such as ministry to people who don't have as much as us. If we do, we will reap dividends that will be far and away greater than anything we will ever get by investing it on our self image or having everything we now have in our lives insured against loss. How many more years do *you* have left to get serious about God and what God wants you do?

If you are not already, perhaps it is time to get serious about your commitment to God's work, as it is expressed in your community here and in the larger mission of this community and world. If not here at Maryvale Drive Presbyterian, where else in your life are you personally participating in ministry

with other Christians to make a difference in the lives of others?

Sadly, sometimes the shrewd entrepreneurs in our society *are* more wise than "the children of light." But make your presence in this worshipping and ministering community count. Be proud of it and put yourself into it. If we can't be counted on to support the worshipping and learning community of our own faith expression, how can we expect to be entrusted with the greater matters of God's kingdom beyond these walls? ❧