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Luke 16:1-13

MANAGER TRAINING PROGRAM

Today's parable just might be the strangest of all Jesus' parables. It is a surprising parable because the principle character is dishonest and, at the end of this story, this dishonest manager is commended. For Jesus to commend someone who is dishonest is extremely surprising. What are we to make of such a strange parable?

The parable, however, is not told to encourage us to be dishonest. Rather, Jesus tells this story to illustrate a quality, a notable characteristic about the primary character. And that quality is shrewdness. Here's the important take-away from this perplexing parable: the manager is commended not because he was dishonest but because he was shrewd.

When it became apparent to the manager that he was about to be fired for misusing his boss's funds, he realized that his future welfare was at stake. Once he is fired, what will he do for a living? So the manager hatches a clever plan. The manager approaches each of his masters' debtors and one by one he reduces the amount that they owe his former employer. Of course, the debtors are thrilled. The manager has instantly made some new friends who are indebted to him and who will likely help him out in securing a new job. And when the manager's former boss learns about what he has done, he can only shake his head in amazement and acknowledge, "Man, you are one shrewd son of a gun!"

And Jesus ends the parable by stating, "the children of this world are wiser than the children of light when it comes to dealing with their own generation." Jesus is stating that those who embrace the world's values are shrewder in facing trials, challenges, and crises. Jesus is not

instructing his followers to become dishonest. Jesus *is* instructing his followers to be shrewd in using all that is at their disposal to further the realm of God.

Now, remember, Jesus was speaking to people who didn't have a lot of money or possessions. Most of the crowds listening to Jesus, and certainly the disciples themselves, were among the very poor. So this lesson was not delivered to the CEOs of major corporations. What resources did such poor people have to work with? Not much in terms of material goods, that's for sure. But Jesus adds, "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."

Imagine that you are seated and into your lap are heaped the blessings you know in life. Some of those blessings might obviously be tangible things—like your home or apartment, your bank account, your job, your family members and friends, a refrigerator filled with food. But there would also be intangible blessings as well—your capacity to love, your knowledge of God's love for you, your compassionate heart, your outrage at injustice, your curiosity about the world, your ability to assist someone in need, your education, your special talents. Jesus instructs us to understand that all of these, all of these are resources at our disposal.

Maybe you have a lot in the bank or maybe you have almost nothing. Maybe you own a large home filled with possessions, or maybe you live in a studio apartment. But Jesus tells us to take whatever resources exist at our disposal—our material goods as well as our emotional gifts, our unique talents and abilities—and to be shrewd managers of them all in order to advance, not ourselves, but the way of God. Be clever, Jesus tells us, just like the manager in the story. Be resourceful. Because the people of this world are certainly shrewd in taking what they have and making the most of it. And God needs the followers of Jesus to take what we have and to make

the most of it on behalf of the Way of God. Jesus is calling us to become shrewd managers of all that God has given us.

The great humanitarian Mother Teresa is quoted as saying, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." We can do small things with great love.

Most of us this week will not do great things, at least according to what the world considers "great." We are not likely this week to negotiate an international peace treaty. I doubt that this week any of us will discover a cure for cancer, or travel to the International Space Station, or climb Mt. Everest, or write the Great American novel. But this week, you will likely be given the opportunity to share some of your money. This week you will likely be given the opportunity to assist a stranger, to call a friend, to forgive a wrong, to volunteer at a food pantry, to go to choir practice. This week you and I will be given many opportunities to do small things with great love--to use all that is at our disposal wisely and shrewdly in serving Christ's way of love.

The manager in the parable was facing a crisis. He had to be clever in order to find a way forward. The early Christians who the gospel writer Luke first wrote to were facing hardships and trials and needed this story to encourage them to be clever in using their resources to further God's way of love. And we sitting here today, we have our own crises and hardships that confront us. Mainline churches were already in decline before the pandemic. And since the pandemic, they are all dealing with a significant shift in attendance and participation. We face a problem. But do you know what is an ever greater problem? An even greater problem is the rate of child poverty in this country. An even greater problem is the rise of opioid addictions. An even greater problem is people who feel alienated and overwhelmed by the stresses of modern

life. An even greater problem is the increasing divide between the rich and the poor. An even greater problem is the threat of climate change on all of us.

Shrewdness involves being resourceful and clever when dealing with life's challenges. Jesus calls us, his followers, to be shrewd, not so that the institution of the church will survive—which was never Jesus' mandate to us. Jesus calls us to be shrewd so that the good news of God's love and grace and hope will be experienced in our world. How do we take what is at our disposal—our building, our faith, our talents, our time, our compassion, our desire for justice, our joy, our hope—how do we take what is at our disposal and use them shrewdly and wisely in furthering the realm of God? How do we do small things with great love?

Years ago, the young climate change activist Greta Thunberg offered this bit of wisdom to the young people of the world regarding this great existential threat to our globe. She said, "No one is too small to have an impact. Be creative."

Be creative. That's what it means to be shrewd. Be creative.

If you would for a minute, cup your hands together in front of you. Now imagine your hands holding all the resources that are at your disposal. And Jesus tells us to get creative in using them—in finding a way to love someone who is challenging, in resolving a conflict, in using our money and our time in ways that make a real difference to others and our world. Jesus instructs us to become good managers of our resources. Because small things done with great love are indeed the most important ways we can spend the greatest resource of all—our lives.