

Luke 16:1-13

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. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ Then 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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then 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.’ And 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. And 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.

“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. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No 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.”*

Signs of the Times - Using Our Gifts - September 18, 2022

Luke 16:1-13

As a pastor, I meet a lot of adults. As a teacher, I meet a lot of children. I like listening to folks talk about their lives. Particularly I like to hear about their plans and hopes and dreams. After we cut through the small talk, it's really good to hear people open up about themselves because, frankly, many of us won't or can't share what's really going on inside ourselves.

For most of the adults and the children I listen to, I've learned they all have plans and dreams. At the same time, they don't quite know how to make them happen. Kids often dream of unobtainable things. They want to play in the NFL. They want to have lots of money. Others dream of simpler things. Some kids simply want a stable home life or perhaps to be free of a medical condition. And sadly for some kids, those modest dreams can sometimes seem as unobtainable as playing in the NFL or being filthy rich.

When adults share their dreams with me, they tend to be a bit more realistic in terms of what they are looking for. At the same time, adult dreams are often tinged with the words "woulda" "coulda" and "shoulda" referring to opportunities they had in the past which may never happen again. Sadly for adults who may not have obtained their original dreams, they often conclude that no other direction is possible and therefore settle into a kind of "same old, same old" existence where nothing happens and nothing changes and they never try anything new.

Yet for just about all of us the simple truth is that there are always alternatives. Alternative dreams and alternative pathways to achieving them. For the kid who wants to be in the NFL, well the NFL is a huge industry employing thousands of people beside the players. There are managers and trainers and medics and PR people, all of whom help make the team work. Indeed, such jobs can be much more stable than those of the players. For every Tom Brady who can last 25 years there are dozens and dozens of players who don't even make it to one year.

For adults who don't achieve their initial dreams, there are always other directions. The new direction may be related to the original dream or something completely different. The point is that the saying is true, "when one door closes, somewhere a window opens."

However, the words that are never spoken but really should be are: but we have to find the open window.

Life is full of "Nos," isn't it? Perhaps it is in our jobs, perhaps our health, perhaps our relationships. Nobody gets everything they want and that is a very good thing. Perhaps not when we get a No, but in the long run, getting told No by life is actually a true blessing.

We don't like hearing "No." We're going to hear "No." Two facts. The secret to life and living is not about enjoying the good times, but how we handle the bad times.

This morning's scripture is probably the strangest story Jesus ever told. At first, it seems so un-Jesus that we can't quite believe those words came out of his mouth. But always keep in mind that Jesus never intended for us to understand or make sense of his stories immediately. Sure we might get something out of them the first time we hear them. However, one professor of mine described Jesus' stories as kind of "spiritual hand grenades" where he would pull the pin of telling the story, throw it into the crowd, and then wait ,, one minute ,, ten minutes ,, an hour ,, a day. Then -- Boom! We understand the story in a completely different way.

So let's look at this passage from Luke, a passage most of us preacher folks dread preaching about because it is so weird.

Jesus tells a story about a manager who has been stealing from his employer. The boss finds out and fires him. The manager realizes he'll be out of work, doesn't want to dig ditches, and doesn't want to beg. So instead he goes to all his customers and knocks half off of their bills. The manager figures the people whose bills he cut would then take care of him once he was on the streets.

Now, we might expect Jesus to condemn the manager. He was not just a thief, but a double thief! He got himself fired for cheating his boss and then, by cutting his customer's bills, he ripped off his boss again! Wow! The boss had every right to be angry, right? The boss had every right to have his former manager arrested and thrown into jail, right?

Wrong! In another Jesus surprise move, he tells us the boss, far from condemning the dishonest manager, praises him! The master commended the manager because he acted shrewdly! How strange is that?

Bear in mind that in all of Jesus' stories, Jesus himself plays one of the main characters. In fact one of the fun things about biblical interpretation is that Jesus can be either the boss who praised the dishonest manager or even the manager himself. Note that Jesus concludes the story by telling his listeners to "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes." What!

Yes. Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth. What is Jesus saying? Is he telling us to go out and cheat and steal and lie to get whatever we want to get? Jesus says another outrageous thing: the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. Jesus makes it clear that the wolves of Wall Street, the billionaires who got rich overcharging us stupid people — they really are the clever ones of this world.

Wow! So all this “do unto others stuff” is just nonsense? Are we being told to look out for ourselves and run over anyone who gets in our way? Maybe we should be worshipping at the Megachurches with the pastors driving the Rolls-Royces and wearing the Rolex watches? Maybe our understanding of Christian life as one of service and humility is just plain wrong?

Well, in a word, No. Jesus is not praising the Jim Bakkers and the Creflo Dollars of the world. However, what he is praising is the fact that the dishonest manager did not give up.

Let me repeat. The dishonest manager did not give up.

Friends, in working with both children and adults the saddest and most challenging thing I see are the people who, after being told no or after suffering a setback just plain quit. For me, one of the hardest things in the ministry or in my teaching is dealing with people who have given up.

Look, we all have horrible times. We have all faced situations when life has slapped us down hard. There was a time in my life where I literally lost everyone and everything dear to me in the space of six weeks.

Now of course, short of committing suicide, we all go on somehow. When life does not work out the way we think it should, we have two choices. First we can become embittered with life and with ourselves. We can withdraw and simply just do the minimum to get by. I see many adults and children take that road and it breaks my heart. I get it. When a child is called “stupid,” when a child gets bad grades, or struggles to read or do math at the same level as her peers, it can be easy to just believe that he is useless and can’t do anything right.

Many adults have been fired once, twice, many times. Some have had their partners leave them for no reason. Some have received terrible news about their bodies. And as a result, they also withdraw and just do the minimum to get by.

Surely that was the situation of the dishonest manager. He had made a great life for himself, hadn’t he? Over the years, he figured out how to cheat his boss and live pretty high. In his mind, for doubtless many years, he had it made.

Yes, it all backfired. Yes, he suddenly found himself unemployed and disgraced. And, yes, let us be clear, he deserved it. Jesus certainly is not praising the dishonest manager’s way of earning a living. Jesus is not encouraging us to be dishonest ourselves.

However, Jesus is using the experience of the dishonest manager as a powerful lesson. After all, when you get down to it, what was this dishonest man’s real talent? What was he really good at? The dishonest manager’s talent was, well, dishonesty! He was really good at cheating his boss! He was so good, he had gotten away with it for years! So, when he was fired what did he do? He used his

one talent, his one true ability, to steal from his boss one more time. The dishonest manager cut his client's bills in half and therefore earned their gratitude — even if it was once again at the expense of his boss. The point of the story is not that we should be dishonest in our dealing but that we should figure out our true talents and abilities and use them!

Friends, at the heart of all the stories I have heard from adults and children alike when they suffer defeats and setbacks is the mistaken idea that it's all over for them. So many of us are fixated on the thought that we must choose one direction and one direction only and focus what we think are our only talents and abilities on that one thing. And then, and then, if we fail, or even when we fail, we just give up and are afraid to try again because, because, because we might fail again.

Well, let me tell you. I can say with absolute, one hundred percent certainly that in life you will fail. I will fail. We will fail again and again and again. Perhaps our failure is due to things we could control. Perhaps our failure is due to things we cannot control. It doesn't matter. Failure is a part of life and we just have to accept it.

The challenge in life is how we deal with failure. We can either tell ourselves that because we have failed, we ourselves personally are failures and therefore cannot do anything else. And indeed that is what many people do.

Or, or, or we can look at ourselves, search ourselves, know ourselves, and come to the inescapable conclusion that all of us, every one of us, you, me, and every person in this world, has a literal fountain of talents and abilities which we haven't even begun to tap. I tell you, indeed, in this story Jesus is telling you, figure out you talents and use them! The dishonest manager knew his greatest talent was being dishonest and he used it, didn't he? All of us are good not just at one thing, but many, many things. We just have to search ourselves and dare use them.

Friends, our Christian faith is all about failure. If you look at the life of Jesus from a purely human standpoint, Jesus failed and failed miserably, His entire ministry was spent in conflict. He was opposed by religious leaders, government leaders, and in the end, the very people he was sent to help. He died alone. His disciples, his friends abandoned him at his most critical hour. Why, why, why in the world would we want to worship a loser like this, let alone call him God?

Because Jesus found another way. Because God in Jesus Christ did not accept defeat as the final answer. Because God in Jesus Christ declared to him and therefore declares to us that there is always another way. There is always an alternative. There is always a way to use our talents and abilities differently. All we have to do is believe it and do it.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.