

Date Preached	18-Sept-2022	Date Initiated	30-Aug-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Proper 20, Yr C

" 'Whoever is faithful in a very little
is faithful also in much.' "



Don't look now, but it's back! Every three years, in late summer and early fall, we travel through a stretch of St Luke's gospel that just plain hard to digest. For weeks, we get readings about hating your mother and father ... giving away all your possessions ... stealing from your employer ... and, coming up over the *next* few weeks, being condemned to eternal hell for not caring for the poor ... and badgering a corrupt judge to rule in your favor. The last time we entered this stretch, I remember thinking, What a preacher's nightmare! But now, I *am* the preacher—may heaven help us!

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Within this parade of uncomfortable texts, today's is one of the two I find the most difficult: Jesus' parable of the 'dishonest manager' (or 'unjust steward'). About to be fired for wasting his employer's property—Luke uses the same FRITTERING AWAY verb here as in the story of the prodigal son—and knowing that he'll soon be reduced to relying on the charity of others to make ends meet, the manager does something that seems shady—if not outright dishonest. He goes to those who are in debt to his employer and summarily reduces the balances they owe him—and by a lot! Not only are these not the manager's debts to forgive ... but he's also leveraging his boss's receivables in order to feather his *own* nest: the very height of dishonesty.

So why is it, then, that Jesus ends up *commending* the manager? Jesus callsⁱ him "shrewd" ... and tells His own followers to "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, Godⁱⁱ may welcome you into the eternal home[]." Come again? This sounds less like Jesus of Nazareth and more like a pro teaching protégés how to run a racket.

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To understand this parable, we need to reframe it, for Jesus never *intends* it to be a lesson in business ethics or the law of agency. The story hinges *not* on the fact that the debts don't belong to the manager ... but that they're the only thing he has to work with. The rich man has entrusted these receivables to the manager; and when push comes to shove ... when his time is almost up ... he uses the only thing he's got, in order to help others, by reducing their debts.ⁱⁱⁱ

The lesson of this cryptic parable is to leverage whatever means we have ... to improve the lives of others. Jesus' point, in essence, is that whatever God has endowed or entrusted us with is not as ours to amass or accumulate ... to lock up in barns or banks. These assets—however plentiful or paltry—are, in fact, the tools God has given us to help as *many* as we can, as *much* as we can. For "[w]hoever is faithful in a very little"—in the petty things of *this* world—"is faithful also in much"—in the caring and merciful ways of God that Christ exemplifies ... and most pointedly on the Cross.

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Beginning today and until the start of Advent, we'll be praying a eucharistic prayer found in an official supplement^{iv} to *The Book of Common Prayer*. This beautiful prayer plumbs the goodness of God's creation and the ways we, both consciously and unconsciously, resist it. It recalls how God "made ready the creation ... and brought all things into being: sun, moon and stars; earth, winds and waters; and every living thing." And how we, as stewards—*unjust stewards??*—entrusted with the care and preservation of God's handiwork, "rebelled against" God. The prayer recounts how, "[I]iving among us, Jesus loved us ... and yearned to draw the whole world to Himself." And how we ... clinging too much to the petty things of this world to note His unfailing welcome of the outcast, healing of the sick and proclamation of salvation to the poor ... "were heedless of His call to walk in love." And, finally, we ask God to "[b]reathe your Spirit over the whole earth[,] and make *us* Your new creation ... for the world You have made."

The shape of this prayer fits the parable of the dishonest manager to a *T*: You, O God, have entrusted us with great gifts and responsibilities, but we risk holding them for ourselves alone, rather than using them to help others. Feed us Your grace again, O Lord, so that we ... thus filled with your Spirit ... may go out and leverage what you've given us charge of ... to *re-create* the lives of those who are poor or suffer; are threatened or marginalized.

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We are entering, once again, the season of creation and harvest: of reckoning the abundance of all God's gifts to us and deciding which—and how many—we will devote to Jesus' work in this world. Each one of us has, like the manager in today's parable, been entrusted with "a very little" through which we can prove ourselves "faithful," as we make the myriad decisions and choices of daily life.

In a world of rapidly rising sea levels, each of us decides what kind of vehicle to drive ... and how far; how often to fly in planes; how much to heat and cool our homes. In a **country** that generates almost five pounds of trash per person per day^v ... in a **world** whose oceans are clogged with upwards of 50 *trillion* pieces of plastic^{vi} ... each of us decides how much food to buy (and, thus, potentially waste); whether to make the effort to recycle or enjoy the ease of merely discarding; what containers to buy beverages and carry our groceries in. In a world whose air is edging toward unbreathable and whose water is increasingly unsafe to bathe in, let alone drink ... each of us decides whether to support renewable sources of energy; whether to walk or drive; whether to purchase from companies that care ... or that merely sell the cheapest.

Yes, these constant, everyday decisions seem infinitesimal—even futile—in the face of the global environmental calamity scientists tell us this world is quickly approaching. And yet, they are the "very little" God has entrusted *us* with ... so that we, like the manager, can improve the lives of others: others who live in places we never visit; who suffer privations we never experience; who confront *now* the risks of environmental calamity we haven't begun to countenance. For in being faithful in *this* "very little" ... we are faithful in *very, very much*, indeed.



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ⁱ *I.e.*, in the mouth of the rich employer, who allegorically is God in this story.

ⁱⁱ Thus, the commentary in *Sacra Pagina* (the third-person plural Luke uses here is equivalent to the divine passive and signifies God's act).

ⁱⁱⁱ There is an element of **reward** in this parable, as well. Just as the manager will, we presume, be rewarded for his generosity by being cared for when he's turned out of his job, so, too, will we be rewarded in heaven for doing right by others. Indeed, through Christ we have *already been* 'rewarded,' as it were.

^{iv} *Enriching Our Worship 1: Morning and Evening Prayer; The Great Litany; The Holy Eucharist* (Church Publishing, 1998). We will pray Eucharistic Prayer 2, which begins on page 60.

^v <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/national-overview-facts-and-figures-materials> (data are as of 2018; site accessed on 06-Sept-2022).

^{vi} https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/ocean_plastics/#:~:text=THE%20PLASTIC%20PROBLEM&text=And%20every%20year%2C%20billions%20of,sheets%20to%20the%20sea%20floor (accessed 06-Sept-2022).