

SERMON TITLE: "Parables of Power: Managing Faithfully"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 16:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 24, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

There's been a story in the news this week about the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind. Over a four-year period, a former employee of the schools embezzled \$67,000. She used business credit cards for personal purchases and "then took steps to conceal the transactions." The financial analyst got away with that immoral and illegal activity because she was very good at covering her tracks. Apparently, a lack of staff and significant turnover of supervisors added to the problem. As soon as this corruption was discovered, the employee was fired. The schools are now seeking criminal charges against the woman. "'I'm just disgusted,'" said Joel Coleman, superintendent of the schools. "'For the life of me, I can't understand someone who would steal money donated to deaf and blind children. It just makes me sick.'"*

That sad story from our own state goes well with today's scripture reading. Over the past few weeks, we've been focusing on Jesus' "Parables of Power" in the Gospel of Luke. So far, we've heard Jesus tell stories about investing in the future, sowing and growing, and seeking and finding. Today, we're moving on to Luke chapter 16, where we listen to Jesus tell a strange and puzzling story about a dishonest manager who is fired but then commended by his master. Let's consider this parable and see if we can find power in managing faithfully.

1—DON'T SQUANDER RESOURCES

This parable presents us with some interpretive challenges. Even Bible scholars scratch their heads over this confusing story that Jesus told. But before we get into the hard part, let's begin with one truth that seems sure: Faithful managers don't squander resources. Verses one and two tell us that, just as soon as the rich man heard the charges that his manager "was squandering his property," the master summoned and fired the manager. Trust was betrayed. Their relationship was broken. The manager's job was to protect

and improve the master's riches, not waste them. This behavior was unacceptable and had to stop immediately.

It's interesting that the word "squander" is used in this parable because that's exactly the word that was used in the parable of the prodigal son at the end of Luke 15. As you might recall, the younger son asked his father to give him his inheritance early. Then the son traveled and "squandered" his money on extravagant living until his inheritance was completely gone and he had to return home to seek forgiveness from his father.

With two back-to-back parables about squandering in Luke 15 and 16, it's pretty obvious that faithful managers don't squander resources—whether those resources are their very own or resources entrusted to them by someone else. I think we all know of people for whom money just seems to burn holes in their pockets. For whatever reasons, they can't seem to save anything, and, consequently, they're always on the verge of a crisis. And, sadly, we know of too many cases—individual and societal—where resources are wasted on the wrong priorities.

Just this week in my devotional time, I came across a story in 2 Kings, chapter 12. Jehoash had become the king of Judah, and he wanted to repair the temple. But years into his reign, the priests still hadn't gotten the temple repaired. Apparently, the priests had been spending money on gold and silver objects for use in the rituals of worship inside the temple, and had failed to tend to the building itself. So, King Jehoash called together the priests and ordered them to turn the temple funds directly over to those who would supervise carpenters, builders, masons, and stonecutters. The story indicates that the supervisors of the workers were honest and handled the funds well, which sounds a bit like an indictment against the priests. But maybe it was also a matter of priorities.

Jump ahead thousands of years, and we still have questions and conflicts about those kind of things. Whether we're thinking about churches, schools, government agencies, or businesses--when budgets are tight, which is more important? Caring for the building and the property or spending money on staff salaries

and programming? Or on a more personal level, at your home, which is more important? Repairing your house or fixing your teeth? Those questions don't often come with easy answers, but we are most powerful when we figure it out well. Managing faithfully means determining the best priorities, so that we don't squander resources.

2—KNOW WHO OUR MASTER IS

Now we move on to the aspect of this parable that's confusing. If the manager got fired, how was he still able to reduce the debts owed to the master? And, if the manager was truly dishonest, why did the master commend him? And what's up with Jesus' words after the parable? Why did Jesus say, in verse 9, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes"? Was Jesus really advocating that we use *dishonest* wealth? Did he really think that such friends would be able to provide *eternal homes* for us? And, in verse 11, what did Jesus mean by being "faithful with dishonest wealth"?

Well, that's why Bible scholars are so puzzled by this passage of scripture. There's definitely something missing in the verbal and cultural translation from what Jesus meant, to what people heard, to what Luke wrote down, to what we have today. No one thinks that Jesus meant it was good to be dishonest, or that dishonesty would earn us eternal life. But, verse 13 gives us the clarity that we do have to know who our master is. There are so many times in life when we feel torn between loyalties. We want to be faithful and honest, but we aren't sure to what or to whom we owe our allegiance. And rarely are these things simple.

A few weeks ago, I re-watched the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Most of you are familiar with that World War 2 story about trying to find and rescue a mother's one last son, after his three brothers had all been killed in battle. After the order was received, the soldiers raised a lot of questions. Was it really right to put all their lives on the line to save one other soldier? Sure his mother was grieving, but what about the grief of *their* mothers if *they* died? Yes, they had orders from the commander in chief. But didn't they also

have brains and common sense they were supposed to use? In the end, the company did follow their orders. But it was a costly loyalty, a burden that weighed heavily on Private Ryan even into his elderly years.

Other times, we've heard of situations where a high-level person put pressure on a subordinate to do something questionable, and that lower-level person refused and then lost their job or didn't advance as they had hoped. In cases when a boss is expecting an employee to lie, steal, cut corners, discriminate against certain types of people, perpetrate violence, or perform sexual favors, for example, what is the meaning of managing faithfully? Is it playing along, obeying the rules of that prominent figure, or does managing faithfully mean obeying the higher authority of God?

I believe that Jesus was advocating that, whenever our choice is between God and money, the answer is obvious. We need to be managers who are faithful to God. Jesus was clear that we shouldn't squander resources, but he wasn't in favor of gouging and hurting people for the advancement of wealth either. In the parable of the prodigal son in chapter 15, the father forgave his squandering son. Forgiveness was a higher value than lost money. In this parable of the dishonest manager in chapter 16, the master came around to seeing that forgiving a portion of the debts was a shrewd and commendable move that provided well for the manager's future.

If we have any doubt that forgiveness and mercy is the key principle of our master God, then all we have to do is look a little further in Luke chapter 16. In verses 19-31, Jesus tells another story about a rich man who ignored the misery of a poor, sick man named Lazarus who lay at his gate and then died. And I would dare to teach you that the reason why one verse (verse 18) about divorce and adultery is mysteriously thrown into the middle of this chapter about rich and poor people and managing money is because, in Bible times, marriage was the only means for a woman to have an income, and divorce—which could only be initiated by the husband—was a financial death sentence to the woman, unless she was lucky enough to remarry. But even remarriage was a shuffle game controlled by men, and so Jesus labeled their actions a type of sin.

Sorry, guys, I'm not trying to beat you up. I'm just making the point that Jesus' primary interest wasn't in certain members of society becoming rich and holding onto great wealth. In Jesus' understanding, the bounty of God's riches was meant to be shared with all people. Jesus offered mercy and forgiveness to everyone: the wayward son, the mid-level manager, the debtors in over their heads, the women who had no say in their financial well-being, and the poor wretches laying sick and dying at our gates. If we choose to go with God, those are the values our master will expect us to manage faithfully. It's a powerful thing to know who our master is.

CONCLUSION

For most of his working years, my dad was a millwright. In a mine and later in a lumber mill, he welded and shaped metal to repair machinery and keep the operations going. Because my dad was good at what he did and was a highly responsible person, his bosses appreciated his abilities and offered him the opportunity to become a foreman. That was stressful for Dad because he was a detail guy, a craftsman. He took pride in the quality of his own work. Being responsible for other people's lesser productivity wasn't easy, but Dad did it well enough that his bosses then made another offer. They asked Dad to become a "company man." That's where Dad drew the line. He wasn't willing to cross over to that other side of the great divide, as he perceived it. He wasn't willing to make more money at the expense of the union laborers, whom Dad could see were suffering from work-related sicknesses.

I'm not saying that my dad was some kind of super smart guy or saint or anything like that. I'm just lifting him up as an example of someone who thought about money and management. If we're going to have good power in this world, we all have to do that sometimes. Whether we're managing a millwright shop, a school, a church, a business, a family, or a governmental office, we need to be careful not to squander resources, and we need to know who our master is. In his parable of power, that's Jesus' lesson on managing faithfully.

* <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865658372/Audit-Ex-employee-embezzled-67K-from-Utah-Schools-for-the-Deaf-and-Blind.html?pg=all>