The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 21, 2025

Ultimate Security

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

The rich man and the deceitful manager (artist unknown)

[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."

In this long season between Pentecost and Advent, our gospel passages each Sunday are an almost continuous reading of Luke's gospel. You may have noticed a recurring theme these weeks: money, possessions, and power. This is no surprise – Jesus spoke more about wealth than any other moral issue. "The gap between rich and poor concerned him more than lying, stealing, or sexual immorality – especially in Luke's gospel, where Jesus confronts the rich four times as often as he does in the other gospels."[1]

Today's parable, though – called the parable of the "dishonest manager," or "shrewd steward," or "prudent treasurer," depending on how you want to interpret it – wins the award for bewilderment. It is impossible to read allegorically – God can't be the rich man, or the deceitful manager, or the debtors eager to embrace his scheme.

Countless sermons and commentaries have tried to make this parable fit our picture of Jesus as always wise, honest, and ethical — and they often bend over backwards to do it. I have read interpretations of this passage which hinge on the differences between wholesale and retail businesses in 1st century Palestine, customs of Greco-Roman gift-giving as a way of establishing social bonds, and the multiple nuances of the word "shrewd."

And perhaps that is one key — the steward's shrewdness, his decisiveness and creativity in a moment of crisis, is at least part of what Jesus is affirming.

None of that study led to an "aha" moment, though, just weariness of academics and preachers trying to make Jesus make sense. I propose that, instead of trying to map the parable to a clear spiritual mandate, we look at the heart of the matter – money and what it means to us.

One of the realities of working in finance is you think about and talk about money a lot. For over 30 years, I have worked with hospital CFOs to determine how much money they need to invest in their mission, how much money they have to pay back debt, how much money is left for competitive wages.

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, "Our True Value," March 4, 1999.

After a while, the numbers blur. Structuring a billion-dollar deal takes about the same amount of work as a million-dollar one. And money loses its emotional edge – it becomes just a resource, deployed in positive or wasteful ways.

But all this focus on money can unwittingly turn it into a deceptive yardstick for one's own life. When I was starting out, most of my pay came as a year-end bonus — but only if I had proved my worth. No one explained the evaluation process, and the mysterious decision rested with just one or two senior partners. It created a constant sense of scarcity throughout the year, growing anxiety as December approached, and finally a sigh of relief when the number was revealed.

During the financial crisis in 2008, the bank I worked for eliminated my department and I was laid off. I wasn't alone – so many people lost their jobs, homes, or retirement savings in that time. I was lucky that Will still had a job and we had some savings.

But the blow to my self-worth surprised me. Without the external validation of title and money, I felt deflated and vulnerable. I am not proud of this, but it's the truth, and it made me realize all I had unconsciously absorbed in those years on Wall Street. I had to wrestle with the questions, "What makes me valuable? What makes me safe?"

I'm pretty sure the disciples and Pharisees listening to Jesus asked these questions, too. In his many parables and teachings about economic matters, Jesus has several consistent messages about the true measure of worth.

- Our loyalties are revealed by our money habits.
- The pursuit of wealth may feel like providing stability and security for oneself and one's family, but it is a false security.
- All we have – materially and spiritually – is a gift from God, so the only life-giving approach to possessions is the practice of gratitude, stewardship, and generosity.

And running through all these parables is another deep truth: real security and the knowledge of one's value come from relationships. Relationships of love and interdependence, with a commitment to forgive and repair, to weather hard times as a team rather than running away.

And also the importance of relationships across difference, where we don't draw a circle around our loved ones and call it enough, but are open-heartedly curious about our next-door neighbor, the check-out clerk, the person next to us on the bus. Although the dishonest steward's method of relationship-building is transactional, he does know that his well-being is bound up with that of others.

There is evidence from psychology and history that in times of national or large-scale anxiety, people tend to narrow their sense of communal responsibility and hoard more.

Think about the early days of the pandemic, when the grocery-store shelves were empty of toilet paper and many other goods. When stay-at-home orders and school closures cut people off from their usual networks, many felt lonely and vulnerable even though they were physically safe. Belonging and hope only returned when we figured out how to care for each other from a distance – both emotionally and practically.

What really makes you feel safe? What gives you hope? Is it locking the doors? Moving to a new country? Watching your investment portfolio more closely? Or is it the connections that bring you home — to God, to neighbor, to yourself?

We are people of faith because God has filled us with a desire to love and care no matter the circumstances. We gather as a community of thanksgiving and of need because we know we cannot navigate this world alone, not in a way that is sustainable and life-giving, anyway.

And we know that where two or three are gathered in God's name, the Holy One is in our midst, strengthening, inspiring, and guiding us to the next step in our journey. We can count on that. It is our ultimate value – our ultimate security.

Amen.