

What's It All About?

**September 23, 2007 ~ 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Holy Trinity UMC**

Rev. Susan Morrison

Before reading this morning's gospel lesson, let me tell you a story. It's the story of a Texas Sunday School teacher named "Miss Lillian" who ended every Sunday School class (which in those days was gender divided) with a stern warning about alcohol. "Now boys," she would admonish, "watch that demon rum." One day the Sunday School lesson was about the wedding at Cana of Galilee where Jesus turns jugs of water into wine. A student inquired, "Miss Lillian, how do you explain that story about Jesus when you warn us always of the sin of drinking?" Miss Lillian replied defiantly, "I don't know how to explain it but I do know I'd have a lot more respect for Jesus if he hadn't done it!"

Miss Lillian's attitude reflects how I felt all week working on this morning's scripture lesson. "I don't know how to explain it but I'd have a lot more respect for Jesus if he hadn't told it!" This text is one that gives preachers sleep deprivation. Living with this lesson all week was like playing and replaying the Red Sox recent series with the Toronto Blue Jays. No matter how I looked at it, this lesson just wasn't a winner!

It's a story about a dishonest manager who is selfish and conniving and mismanages and squanders his landowners property. Yet, at the end of the story, this dishonest manager is commended for what he did.

Here's how the story reads in **Luke 16: 1 – 8a**.

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich landowner who, having received reports of a manager squandering the property, summoned the manager and said, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because it's about to come to an end.'

Then the manager thought, 'What will I do, now that my employer is going to fire me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have it! Here's a way to make sure that people will take me into their homes when I am dismissed.' So, the manager called in the landowner's debtors one by one. The manager said to the first one, 'How much do you owe my employer?' The debtor answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' The manager said, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' To another the manager asked, 'And how much do you owe?' The answer came, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' And the manager said, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'

Upon hearing this, the owner commended the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly.

Do you begin to understand my angst? How could that manager possibly be commended for what he did? Let's replay the story dramatically. And as you listen to the story for a second time, please ask yourself "What's it all about?"

(Charles – Narrator; Keith – rich landowner; Dorothy – manager)

Charles steps forward and begins:

Narrator: Jesus told this story to his disciples.

Once there was a rich landowner (Keith gets up out of seat and comes forward – acting very rich!)

who had a trusted manager (Dorothy gets up out of seat and catches up with Keith – maybe linking arms with him)

Now the rich landowner got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of her position by running up a huge personal expense account. (Dorothy leaves Keith's side and moves into congregation winking and smiling.)

So the rich landowner called in the manager (Keith goes out into congregation and brings Dorothy back to the front. There they face each other.)

Rich landowner: What's this I hear about you? You're fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.

Manager: Now what am I going to do? I've lost my job as manager. I'm not strong enough for a laboring job, and I'm too proud to beg. (Walk around, thinking, thinking)

Ah! I've got a plan. This will help me out in the future when I'm out of work. People will even take me into their homes.

Narrator: So the manager went at it. One after another, she found the people who were in debt to her boss. (Dorothy goes out into congregation and confronts two different people – to be "pre arranged")

Manager: (to the first debtor) How much do you owe my boss?

Debtor 1: A hundred jugs of olive oil.

Manager: Forget it. Change the amount of your bill to fifty.

Manager: (moving to second debtor) How much do you own my boss?

Debtor 2: A hundred sacks of wheat.

Manager: Forget it. Change the bill and make it eighty.

Narrator: Now here's the surprise! The rich landowner praised the crooked manager! (Dorothy returns to the front and hands Keith the results of her collection.)

Landowner to manager: Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been very shrewd in your dealings.

(Players return to their seats)

What's it all about? Sometimes scripture lessons, like life itself, are very complex and have many possible interpretations or messages for us. I believe that this is one of those stories. If you'd be willing to eavesdrop, I invite you to listen in on several possible conversations between the rich owner and the dishonest manager. And as you listen to these conversations consider how the Spirit might be speaking to you this very day.

* * * * *

Manager: Why did you commend me for being shrewd when you knew that I had fleeced you and in turn, cut deals with your debtors, something that under any circumstance would be unethical and probably illegal.

Rich Owner: I commended you for your shrewdness because I realized that above all else you understood the importance of relationships. In this case, the ends justified the means. Why you were clever and secured a future relationship with all of my debtors. Knowing that you would be unemployed, you found a way to be in the good graces of many of my clients. Your deceit was the price that had to be paid to restore business relationships with everyone involved. For you see, even my social standing was in question. Because you had become unreliable and incompetent, my reputation had been marred. So there was no problem in your taking a major financial hit in order to recover lost honor and regain a right relationship between ourselves and our community.

Manager: You're right. And that interpretation could inform everyone's living. We are all managers of a number of relationships and we need to calculate the sacrifices, the risks, even the losses required of us to maintain honor and respect in our relationship with God and with one another. Whatever the cost, Jesus implies, we must keep our relationship with God and neighbor in tact.

* * * * *

Rich Owner: Hey, my manager, did you just hear that conversation? That is such an erroneous way to interpret what happened between us. Anyone who knows Jesus' ethics knows that you were a corrupt, scandalous manager and did not deserve to be

commended. Scholars believe that the end of this story was changed by scribes who were copying the story or religious leaders who wanted a different ending. Oh, I had the last word all right, but it wasn't a kind one. What it really said was: "And the landowner said, 'You scoundrel. You deserve to be eternally punished for the way that you acted.'"

Manager: That's what I deserve, all right. I was dishonest, conniving, self centered and corrupt. I saw everything in terms of utility. It was all about the usefulness of people and things for my life, my future. I was responsible for the broken relationship between us. Everything I did exploited others and I was proud of it.

Rich Owner: Yes, and despite all that you did, I gave you a chance to redeem yourself and you failed. You could have made an honest audit, but instead, you went out and exploited others for the sake of your own future. People need to base relationships on trust and love, which was my upright and honest way of dealing with you. That's the real moral of this parable.

* * * * *

Manager: No! No! No! boss. What you see is what you get! I believe that what is there is correct. You commended me because I thought on my feet. This story is about urgency! I was an employee who faced a huge crisis. It was like getting a pink slip from you and I had to quickly determine a course of action that would secure my future. Urgency defined my reality. I was in crisis.

Rich Owner: Yes, that's why I commended you! You were a lot like the people of Jesus day who found themselves in a time of urgency. Jesus claimed that the kingdom of God had arrived, that it was in the very midst of his contemporaries. And so he teaches and preaches the urgency of making choices. "Come, follow me" he says. "Do everything that you must to put me first in your lives. Sell your possessions. Love your neighbor. Do good to those who despise you. This is urgent business."

Manager: That's right! The presence of Jesus requires urgent decisions. We hear the call and must decide if we are going to answer. Being Jesus' disciple is urgent business. Every decision that we make, each little choice has important repercussions for God's future.

* * * * *

Rich Owner: This story comes right after the story of the Prodigal Son in the gospel of Luke. As the rich land owner, I am the father figure in the story.

Manager: Yes, and like the prodigal son, I squandered what you gave me. Even the same word is used in the story. It was reported that I had squandered your property just like it was reported to the father that his son had squandered his share of the estate.

Rich Owner: And the real ending to the story that somehow got lost is that you returned to me after the audit repentant and asking for forgiveness, just like the prodigal son returned home admitting his sin and asking for forgiveness. It was intended to be a story about redemption and God's unconditional love that makes redemption possible.

Manager: And you hired me back and threw a big party, inviting all of our business friends and acquaintances.

* * * * *

Manager: Anyone who reads what's in the bible knows that this story is about money. I was dishonest with your money. I squandered it and used money for things that I wanted. I had no care, no concern for those who had none.

Rich Owner: I believe that the thrust of our story is that the arrival of the kingdom of God in Jesus has exposed every ones mismanagement of money. We cling to money and possessions as if these were the real treasures of life. We all are squanderers. Throughout the gospels, Jesus doesn't condemn money but he condemns the love of money and the misuse of money. When money and wealth and materialism become our god, we are worshipping an idol. What our story calls people to do is to invest in that which is eternal, that which promotes the coming of the kingdom of God here on earth. Use money for holy purposes. Money can be put to God's service. We are given the freedom to decide how we spend our money but we are admonished to invest our money not to satisfy the wants of some, but to satisfy the needs of all. It has been said that "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also."

* * * * *

And so I leave you with many possible ways to interpret this morning's challenging gospel lesson. Through this story, what is the Spirit saying to you this morning? What is it that you need to hear in order to draw you closer to God and God's intentions for your life? I ask God's blessing on both the telling and the hearing of this story that Jesus told to his disciples. Amen and Amen.