

## **The Need for Shrewdness in Faith**

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

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An ancient story tells of a poor, hungry man was caught stealing food. The sentence was especially harsh. The king ordered that the thief be hanged. On the way to the gallows, the poor thief said to the governor, who was in charge of carrying out the execution, that he knew a wonderful secret. It would be a terrible shame, he said, to allow the secret to die with him. He said that he would be willing to disclose the secret in front of the king. He teased the governor by saying that the secret would allow someone to bury the seed of a pomegranate and then make it grow and bear fruit overnight.

Well the governor thought this was intriguing, so he brought the thief before the king and all of the king's high officers of state. Standing before these powerful men, the poor thief dug a hole in the ground and said, *"Here's the secret: this seed must only be put in the ground by a person who has never stolen or taken anything which did not belong to him. I being a thief cannot do it."*

So the thief turned to the prime minister who, frightened, confessed that in his younger days he had taken something that did not belong to him. He, therefore, was not qualified to plant the seed.

Next the thief turned to the treasurer who admitted that while dealing with such large sums of money, he might have at one point or another entered too much or too little. He too was disqualified.

Finally the thief turned to the king, who embarrassingly admitted that he once took a necklace that belonged to his father. No one was qualified to plant the pomegranate seed. So the thief said, *"You are all mighty and powerful men who lack no material comfort, and yet you cannot plant this seed, while I who have stolen a little because I was starving am to be hanged."* The king, pleased with the shrewdness of the thief, pardoned him. (Gaster, *The Exempla of the Rabbis*, 1924)

Ancient stories often featured clever tricksters and wise rogues. The three patriarchs of the Old Testament are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The last, Jacob, was a trickster who deceived his blind father, cheated his brother out of his birthright, and then made off with most of his father-in-law's flock. He was a clever trickster who is nevertheless regarded as one of the three patriarch of Jewish faith.

Jesus knew and understood this tradition. In our text from Luke 16, a parable that has given many Sunday School teachers considerable consternation, Jesus holds up a clever trickster, a dishonest manager, as role model of Christian discipleship.

The story has two main characters: a "rich man" and a "manager." The rich man was probably an absentee landowner. Since he was absent, he hired a manager to run the day-to-day operations. In time, bad news made it back to the rich man. He learned that the manager was squandering his property. The same word is used of the prodigal son, who squandered his inheritance. It means "to broadcast or scatter." It was time for the absentee landowner to make a visit. He called in the manager, accused him of mismanagement, and demanded an accounting.

Here's another similarity to the parable of the prodigal son. Remember when the prodigal son was in the pigpen and carried out an interior monologue, a conversation with himself? He talked to himself about how good his father's servants had it. Plenty of food. Even food to spare, and here he was, a son, working in a nasty pigpen and dying of hunger. This dishonest manager carried out a similar interior monologue. He said to himself, "What am I going to do? This is bad! The boss man is going to fire me. I'm in no shape to dig ditches, and I'm too proud to beg. What in the world am I going to do?"

So he came up with a clever plan. He was still employed, remember? He hasn't been fired yet, so he still has authority to act as the manager. So he called in the rich man's debtors and cut them a deal. The first debtor owed the rich man one hundred jugs of olive oil. This was a commercial operation, and today this would be equivalent to about 900 gallons of olive oil. I don't know how much olive oil you use at your house, but that would last us several lifetimes. The dishonest manager, who was

about to be fired, told the debtor to “quickly” pay for fifty jugs, and that would satisfy his debt. I’m sure the debtor was very please to do that quickly because it reduced his bill by fifty percent.

The manager called in another debtor. He owed one hundred containers of wheat. That would be about 1,000 bushels of wheat by our measurement, a very large amount. He told the debtor to make his bill eighty containers of wheat instead. I’m sure he too was very pleased and quickly did so.

According the Jesus’ parable, the dishonest manager called in each of the debtors and cut them a similar deal, no doubt making them all very happy.

But then the rich man, the boss, found out. Now how to you think he’s going to react? We would expect him to be irate, right? Call in the authorities! Charge this man with theft, deception, and whatever else was possible. Throw the book at him!

But Jesus surprised his hears. The rich man commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Do you see why? The manager made friends of all those debtors. He cut them a deal, and they would not forget his generosity. When he was fired, perhaps they would take him in. Maybe they would offer him a job. Today we might say, “He feathered his own nest.”

A lot of people have struggled with this parable. How could Jesus hold up this clever trickster, a dishonest manager, as role model of Christian discipleship? Is Jesus asking his disciples to be dishonest? No, he’s asking them to be shrewd. “The children of this age are more shrewd,” he told them, “in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” Let me give you my translation of that verse:

*Businessmen, scientists, attorneys, and engineers are more clever, shrewd, in carrying out their work than Christians are in carrying out their mission.*

This parable was not an expectation that the disciples be dishonest. No, it was a challenge to bring their best thinking, their best creativity, their best game, to their work for the Kingdom of God.

And that's what it says to us too. Let us pour creative energy, our best, into our work here in this church. Let us be as smart, creative, and clever as the men and women at HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology who are sequencing the genome. HudsonAlpha has become a global leader in biotechnology and genomic research, making critical discoveries related to ALS, Parkinson's Disease, lupus, multiple sclerosis, many cancers, and childhood genetic disorders. They didn't do that by being mediocre. Some of you build rockets, satellites, and missiles. You worked on the Space Shuttle and the International Space Station. You don't accomplish those things by being mediocre. You do that by bringing your best thinking, your best creativity, your absolute best game.

Here's what Jesus was saying in this parable. If the people of the world can do that with their affairs, then how much more should his disciples do that with the Kingdom of God. There is a place for shrewdness, not dishonesty, shrewdness in our work—with teenagers, children, senior adults, at Lincoln Village, with ESL, in all that we do. So let us bring our best to our work for the Kingdom of God.

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, we know you gave your best. We want to do the same. Amen.