

TEXT: Luke 16:1-13
THEME: You cannot serve God and wealth
SUBJECT: Stewardship
TITLE: Filthy Lucre

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Messiah Moravian
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The story found in Luke 16:1-9 is unique to Luke. That it was challenging to interpret is clear from the fact that Luke gives us four additional endings. The “original” ending is, “Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes.”

That Luke kept the story is evidence he believed it came from Jesus. But Luke knows it sounds like Jesus is blessing embezzlement, so he gives us a few outs.

The first spin is, If you can’t be trusted with lunch money you probably can’t be trusted with the Visa card. The second spin is, If you haven’t been faithful in managing stolen goods, you probably can’t be trusted with the benevolence fund. The third spin is, If you haven’t been faithful in managing the Crop Walk money, you won’t be responsible with your own.

Finally, Luke resorts to a tried and true formula. You cannot serve God and wealth. Someone or something holds our primary, our ultimate allegiance. We don’t get to choose to serve or not serve, just who or what we serve. The idolatry of wealth is a constant temptation for us.

Whatever the merits of these four additional endings may be, they evade rather than answer the questions raised by the story. Even St Augustine remarked, “I can’t believe this story came from the lips of our Lord.” As one cynic advised, “Preach on something else, or you may end up getting fired, like the steward in the parable.”

A rich man’s life-style is made possible by the income from his estate in the country run by tenant farmers. The farmers buy what they need from the company store with whatever is left after the exorbitant rent is paid to the landowner. The harvest is never enough to pay rent and purchase what the families need.

The tenant farmers slip deeper into debt, working harder to pay what cannot be paid. The steward, hired by the rich man, is a notch above the peasant farmers. He has just enough education to keep records and to rationalize his participation in an unjust system.

The landowner fires the steward because of *rumors* that the steward is squandering the landowner’s resources. The steward is no longer authorized to do anything in the landowner’s name. The farmers are not likely to take him in, since he has used his position of authority to deal unjustly with them and perpetrate an economic system guaranteed to keep them in poverty.

So he does something very clever; he gathers them all together and tells them that their debts have been reduced. Indeed, they have been reduced so much that the farmers can see some possibility of hope begin to emerge. Maybe they can repay their debts, begin to make some choices, buy seed, or purchase a herd of their own. Thus both the landowner and the steward are now seen as heroes.

We can use our imaginations here. The landowner comes out to the country to pick up the wealth the steward has collected and to give the wily steward his walking papers. The streets are lined by cheering farmers, shouting his name, telling him that he is their benevolent hero.

He finds out what the steward has done and now, of course, he has a choice to make. He can tell the farmers that this is a terrible mistake, or he can go outside and soak up the acclaim, goodwill, and joy.

Moreover, of course, he will have to take the steward back. Then, when the steward retires, the farmers will gladly take him in, even if the landowner doesn't. He has gone from goat to hero. All is well.

All except for one thing: what the steward did was clearly dishonest. Even if the original rumors were unfounded, the steward is now guilty of squandering the landowner's wealth. He was authorized to do nothing, yet he did much. And Jesus praises him for his shrewdness.

We might argue that Jesus wants his disciples to be shrewd like the steward but not necessarily to be swindlers. Except the "original" ending of the story is "make friends for yourselves *by means of dishonest* wealth." This is not an attack on wealth itself but on dishonest wealth, wealth accumulated by impoverishing others. It is an attack on those who profit from the pain and suffering of the vulnerable. Such wealth is filthy lucre.

Take every cent, by whatever means necessary, out of Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family and put it into addiction treatment programs to ease the suffering of hundreds of thousands who will welcome you with open arms into their homes. You may do so with Jesus' blessing.

Pillage everyone who profits from the manufacture and sale of vaping products, which deliver nicotine, one of the most addictive substances known, at a higher rate than cigarettes. Give the money to research centers trying to understand the effects of vaping and to the development of treatment regimes. The parents of elementary school children who are vaping at alarming rates will welcome you into their homes. Jesus will praise your gumption.

The story, however, that most closely resembles the story told by Jesus is the story of slavery. We might cheer the sacking of the Sacklers, the plundering of the Juuls, but reparations? We are not talking about someone else's money now but ours. Are we still cheering Jesus or wondering about his sanity?