

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

***"Faithfulness"***

In today's Holy Gospel – we hear about a "steward." I know what a steward is when you go on a cruise. A steward is someone who manages someone else's wealth. He does not own that wealth himself, but he has the privilege of enjoying it and using it for the profit of his master. The most important thing about a steward is that he is to serve his master faithfully. When he looks at the riches around him, the steward always must remember that they belong to his master, not to him personally, and that they must be used in a way that will please and profit the master. This particular steward *forgot* that he was a steward and began to act as if he were the owner. Ironically, in Luke chapter 16 – this follows the "Prodigal Son" in which that young man squandered his father's inheritance – the one that he asked for but did not deserve because his father had not died! (Talk about insulting a dad! He became, if you will, a "prodigal steward" who wasted his master's wealth. His master heard about it and immediately asked for an inventory and an audit of his books. And by the way - he also fired his steward.

It looks as though the master in this parable had been acting in a somewhat underhanded manner himself. In the Law given to Moses, Jews were forbidden to lend money at interest, but many people got around this by lending in oil and wheat as easy commodities for this purpose. It is most likely that the steward deducted from the bill what was the interest that the master had been charging, with a higher rate on oil than on wheat. You noticed that when the man owed 900 gallons of oil – the steward said 'make it 400.' If he reduced the bill in each case to the simple amount that had been lent, the debtors would be thrilled. Think about it – if you bought a house and the mortgage lender told you that you only had to pay the principle – wouldn't you be thrilled? The master could not bring charges against the steward without owning up to what he was doing with his own shady business practices. And so, when the master heard about it, he could only admire the man's uniquely clever approach. I have often wondered why the master did not get angry with his steward – but the steward had caught on to what his master was doing – and he gave a break to those that owed.

We also need to realize that this is a parable, and a parable is a story – not an actual event - not a piece of moral teaching about money and how to or how not to use it. If we were given a first-century Jewish story we'd never seen before about a master and a steward, we would probably be able to deduce from it what it was about. The master is God; the steward is Israel. Israel is supposed to be God's property-manager. Remember that God promised the Land for 'all time' to Abraham and his descendants. (By the way – there has never been an expiration date on that – so when people say that it is Palestinian land – I have to question that because the Bible says otherwise! That is another sermon for another day.) Israel is the property manager, the light of God's world, responsible to God and put in charge of His possessions. But Israel – as we've seen in so much of Luke's Gospel – has failed miserably with that assignment, and is under threat of imminent firing. So what then was Israel to do? The Pharisees' answer was to pull the reign of regulations and rituals of the law even tighter, to try to make Israel seem to be more holy. But -this had them ignoring the very people that Jesus was reaching out to.

Jesus, in this parable, suggests that if Israel is facing a major catastrophe - their answer should be to forget the extra bits and pieces of Law which the Pharisees have built up and become 'legalists' about, and to make friends wherever they can. That's what 'the children of this world' (the Gentiles) would do, and 'the children of light' – (the Israelites) ought to do so as well, learning from the cunning people of the world - how to cope in the crisis that was coming upon their generation. Instead of hoarding money and land, Jesus' advice was to use it, as far as you could, to make friends. Jesus gave the example of what this steward said to himself: *'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg-- I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'* (Luke 16:3-4)

This whole lesson is about faithfulness. Money is not a possession, it's a trust: God entrusts property to people and He expects it to be used to his glory and the welfare of his children, not for private glory or glamour. Money is a blessing! Money also, according to this Holy Gospel points beyond itself, to the true riches which await us in the life to come. What they are – we can only imagine; but there are 'true riches' which really will belong to us, in a way that money doesn't, if we learn faithfulness - right now. If we don't, we will find ourselves torn between two masters. This situation was very severe in Jesus' day. In most peasant societies, there was a very small number of extremely rich people and a very large number of the very poor. (Just go to a Third World country. We were blessed to go to Paraguay, twice, and each time we saw the very, very poor part, where people lived in cardboard houses by the river, and then you could drive about 15 miles out by the country club – where they had tennis courts; it was an amazing difference!) The rich included the chief priests (some of their lavish houses in Jerusalem have been discovered by archaeologists – with frescoes and tiled floors – amazing), so any attack on the rich would have to include an attack on them. The Pharisees were more of a mainstream movement; but the danger they faced, with the Land as a key part of their religion, was that they would associate the possession of land, and the wealth it brought, with God's blessing. Jesus made it clear that this was not the way that it should be. Jesus insists that God's standards are not just subtly different from human ones, but **they are the exact opposite!** Throughout this message we are given a challenge to be faithful:

- faithful in our use of money,
- faithful to God rather than money,
- faithful in our hearts - not just in our outward appearances,
- faithful to the kingdom which has now begun with Jesus,
- faithful to our marriages.

Christian stewardship goes way beyond paying God a tithe. True stewardship means that we thank God for *all* that we have and use it as He directs. We are also stewards of *our time*. Time is eternity, minted into precious minutes and handed to us to use- either wisely or carelessly.

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The main lesson of this narrative is that the steward, as dishonest as he was, used this opportunity wisely and prepared for the future. Life ceased to be "enjoyment" and became "investment."

Christians are stewards of the *gifts and abilities* God has given them, and we must use those gifts and abilities to serve others.

- The thief says, "What's yours is mine—I'll take it!"
- The selfish man says, "What's mine is mine—I'll keep it!"
- But the Christian must say, "What's mine is a gift from God—I'll share it!"

We are stewards and we must use our abilities to win the lost, encourage the saints, and meet the needs of hurting people with our "Time, our Treasure and our Talents."

Finally, God's people are stewards of the Gospel. God has committed the treasure of His truth to us, and we must guard this treasure and invest it in the lives of others. It is not always in what we say. The enemy wants to rob the church of this treasure, and we must be alert and courageous. I think Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with saying "Preach the Gospel, always. And if necessary – use words!" A lot of times it is how we treat others.

Like this steward, we will one day have to give an account of our stewardship. If we have been faithful, the Lord will give us His commendation and reward; but if we have not been faithful, we will lose those blessings, even though we will still be saved and enter heaven. Famous preacher and evangelist Vance Havner often said, "God called us to play the game, not keep the score." If we are faithful stewards, God will reward us generously, and that reward will bring glory to His Name. It is all about faithfulness!