

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

"Faithful Stewards"

When Marilyn and I went on a cruise from New York to Bermuda over thirty years ago, we heard about the "steward" on board. I have been thinking of Deacons Bob and Diane who are currently on a cruise to Bermuda and the Bahamas. I also remember the old TV show, The Love Boat, on which there was a guy named Gopher. I thought he was the Steward, but it turns out he wasn't the steward, but he was the Chief Purser, who handled all of the ship's finances. I found out that a steward worked with the kitchen staff with the meals and also with those who are caring for the passengers rooms or cabins. It shows you how we change words and meanings. The Gospel that I just read spoke about the manager, yet in other versions like the NIV it speaks of the steward. Being old fashioned I went with the steward. In today's Holy Gospel, it refers to a "steward." I got confused with the job descriptions. And so I checked further. In Jesus' time, a steward was someone who managed someone else's wealth. He doesn't own that wealth himself, but has the privilege of using it for the profit of his master and to serve his master faithfully. When he looks at the riches around him, the steward always should remember that they belong to his master, and not to himself personally. This steward *forgot* that he was a steward and was acting as if he were the owner. In Luke chapter 16, this parable follows the parable of the "Prodigal Son" that I referred to last week. That young man squandered his father's inheritance, and had asked for it before his father was even dead – a terrible insult to his father. This steward actually became a "prodigal steward" who wasted his master's wealth. His master heard about it and instantly asked for an inventory, accounting, and an audit of his books, which would have caused him to fire his steward.

However, it looks as though the master in this parable was doing some shady business himself in an underhanded manner. In the Law of Moses, Jews are forbidden to lend money at interest, but many people got around this by lending commodities like oil and wheat, and then hiking out he interest on those. You could assume 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. When the man owed 100 measures of oil, the steward said, 'make it 50.' If he reduced the bill in each case to the simple amount that had been lent, the debtors would be thrilled. How about the man who owed 100 measures of wheat – and the steward says make it '80.' If you bought a house and the mortgage lender told you that you only had to pay the principle – that would be amazing! But not practical or realistic. In this parable, the master could not bring charges against the steward without confessing what he was doing with his own shady business practices. When the master heard about it, he could only admire the steward'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 just a story, an important story with things that everybody used or knew about and could relate to. It is not an actual event. It is 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 that we'd never seen before about a master and a steward, we would

probably be able to determine from that what it was all about. The master is God and the steward would be Israel. Israel is supposed to be God's property-manager. Remember that God promised the Land for 'all time' to Abraham and his descendants. 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 examples in Jesus' teachings in Luke's Gospel, has failed miserably with that assignment, and is under threat of imminent firing. You know what I mean by that. So what was Israel to do? The Pharisees' answer was to pull in the reigns of regulations and rituals of the law even tighter on the Jewish people, this would try to make Israel seem to be more holy. But this had them ignoring the very people that Jesus was reaching out to. The 'lost' and the people 'who were the least.'

In this parable, Jesus 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. Somebody once said that it is all about relationships. 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, since my master is taking the management 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 removed from management, people may receive me into their houses."* (Luke 16:3-4)

This whole teaching if you want to boil it down to one word - is about faithfulness. Money is not a possession, it's a trust: God entrusts property to His 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, eternity. 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 surely 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. In third world countries there are the very poor, the very, very, poor part, and the very rich. There are people that are living in cardboard huts by the river side, and then about 15 miles away there are the very rich who live in county club environments. You have got to believe it to see it. Anyone here every been to a third world country? I have been to Paraguay twice. If you have been to Mexico - that is a very vivid example. Those who have been to the Dominican Republic or Haiti - it is an eye opener to see people who are absolutely dying, and children are wearing cardboard as shoes. When someone comes to you and says we are having a mission to send to the Dominican Republic sneakers or shoes of all sizes - can you help? Please think about it. It will put something on their feet that they have never had before. There are the very, very, very poor and the very, very, very rich. It is an amazing difference!

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 18, 2022, Year C

In Jesus' time, the rich included the chief priests (some of their lavish houses in Jerusalem have been discovered by archaeologists – with frescoes and tiled floors), 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 be associated as 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 Jesus gave a challenge to be faithful:

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

Christian stewardship goes way beyond paying God a Biblical tithe of ten percent of what you make. True stewardship means that we thank God for all that we have and that we use it as He directs. We are also stewards, not just of our money, but of our time. Time is eternity, made into precious minutes and handed to us to use- either wisely or carelessly. The main lesson of this parable is that the steward, as dishonest as he was, took this opportunity wisely and was preparing for the future. For him, life stopped being "enjoyment" and became an "investment."

Christians are stewards of the gifts and abilities that God has given to each one of us, and we are to use those gifts and abilities to serve others. I have heard this example:

- 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 should say, "What's mine is a gift from God—I'll share it!"

We have been called to be stewards and we must use our abilities to win the lost, encourage those of our co-workers, and meet the needs of hurting people with “Our Time, our Treasure and our Talents.”

Finally, God's people are stewards of the Gospel, as well. God has committed the treasure of His truth to each one of us, and we must guard this treasure and invest it in the lives of others. It is not always in what we must say. The enemy wants to rob the church of this treasure, and we must be alert and courageous. I believe that Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with saying this, “Preach the Gospel, always, and if necessary – use words!” That means try to be a Christian in everything that you think, do, and say. 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, then God will give us and reward us; but if we have not been faithful, we will lose those blessings, even though we will still be saved and will enter heaven. Understand this – you will not lose your salvation – because if you believe in Jesus, and see Him as your Savior

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 18, 2022, Year C

and Lord – then you are saved – but – even though you will still enter heaven, you will not have those blessings – the abundant blessings that have also been promised. If we are faithful stewards, God will reward us generously, and that reward will bring glory to His Name. You see, it is all about our faithfulness!