

## Faithful in Little, Faithful in Much

Meditation on Luke 16:1-13

Sept. 18, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position 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 dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

*'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money or wealth.'*

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Other children were laughing, talking, and gluing colored pompons on pinecones--making Christmas tree crafts in Kids Klub. But not one little girl, new to Kids Klub this fall, along with her older brother. They wore uniforms from ACA--the Christian charter school for special needs children here on our campus. The little girl was off by herself, staring at the glue on her fingertips with a blank expression. Her pinecone had only a few pompons.

“Hello, I’m Karen,” I said, then asked the little girl her name. “Jacey,” she said, shyly. I sat down and started gluing pompons on another pinecone, showing her how I put the glue on the pinecone -- not the pompons, as she had been trying to do. I was hoping she would want to do more with her craft. But she stared at me and then back at her gluey fingertips. I asked, “Don’t you want to glue some more pompons on your Christmas tree?”

“No,” she said. “I want to wash my hands.”

Another child approached me for help, then, so I left Jacey and didn’t notice her again until she needed help gathering her things, when most of the other children were already lined up. A teen volunteer had helped her wash her hands. Yes, there was something special about the little girl and her older brother. But the specialness went beyond learning differences, their grandmother, Deb, told me after Kids Klub. Deb, with her husband, are raising their two grandchildren. While she and I talked, Jacey and Tyce watched the Fellowship committee lay out desserts for our Tuesday night supper. They stared longingly at the cupcakes, cookies, and ice cream before asking me what they were *for*.

I invited them to stay for our church supper--for meatloaf and mashed potatoes, vegetables, and biscuits, and, of course, dessert. Deb hesitated before saying she didn't have money for the supper that evening. Pork chops and leftovers awaited them at home. But the children continued to look longingly as the hot food trays were carried out from the kitchen. "Why don't you stay?" I said. "Don't worry about the money." And so they did. We sat together, with other church members at a long table. The children ate. And ate. And there was plenty of food left over.

The following Tuesday, a similar scene played out. This time, it was their grandfather who stayed with the children because Deb had a meeting. A girl named Elly sat across from Jacey and called Jacey her "best friend." They had only known each other from two afternoons of Kids Klub. The children ate. And ate. And there was plenty of food leftover.

I had a crazy idea last summer about the Tuesday night suppers. I asked session to allow the children and families of the childcare center to stay for our meals--without requiring them to pay. Some of them truly are struggling financially. The session first asked questions, such as where would the money come from to pay for the food? Then, they approved my crazy idea, which wasn't logical in this world's reasoning, but in Kingdom reasoning, it made perfect sense. The suppers are an opportunity for our church to reach out and share the gospel through friendship and a small act of kindness -- revealing the grace and welcome of the people of God. Our hope is that more members will come to the suppers to greet and welcome new people and eat with

them, too. And we hope that more members will want to join those who help serve the meals, truly embodying the warmth of God's love.

By giving and actively participating in this ministry and other exciting ministry opportunities at our church, you are answering our Lord's question, "Who do you love--God or wealth?"

If we are faithful in just a little, we are faithful in much!

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"Who do you love?" is the question Jesus poses to his disciples, the Pharisees and all of us listening in. This is a "don't be like the Pharisees" story because they are "lovers of money," as Luke says in the passage immediately following today's reading. After this parable, the Pharisees ridicule Jesus for teaching that we demonstrate faithfulness to God when we *extend hospitality to the poor* and use wealth and friendship to further God's Kingdom.

Unlike the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and Prodigal Son, this one is not meant to be an allegory! Jesus isn't telling us to take any of these roles--not the "shrewd" or "dishonest" manager, as Jesus calls him, and not the rich man. This parable is drawn simply from daily life; it is what Jesus' audience takes for granted about the way the world works.

The wealthy man--is he good or bad? Not a very likeable guy, is he? He really is rich in that the quantities of the debts owed to him are large, reflecting a considerable olive grove with an acreage of 20-25 times more than an ordinary family farm. Jesus is talking to a Greco-Roman audience where friendships and economics are inseparable. Like *The Godfather*, the exchange of money created, maintained and solidified

various forms of friendship. Like other places in his gospel, Luke doesn't portray the rich in a favorable light in this reading. He pronounces misfortune on the rich in 6:24, on those who find their security in wealth in 12:16, and those who invite only their friends, relatives, and rich neighbors to their homes for dinner in 14:12, so they may receive invitations in return. Jesus says, in verses 13 and 14, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

The manager is more interesting. Is he good or bad? Jesus calls him "shrewd" and "dishonest." A "manager" in the Roman context is a slave or a freed slave, who acts as his master's agent in his business affairs. Though a slave, he would have a high status because of his master's wealth. Think of Joseph, from Genesis! People actually sold themselves as slaves to manage rich people's wealth; it beat living in poverty, doing manual labor or begging-- the manager's choices when his master discovers he has squandered his property. Without his job as manager, a slave would have no home, no place to go.

After a brief moment of indecision and a soliloquy that reminds me a little of Hamlet's, "To be or not to be...?" the manager hatches a plan. Are you surprised when the master, though his ex-manager has just cheated him out of more money, praises him for his "shrewdness?" For the manager has secured himself a home with his newly made "friends," who will welcome him, despite their humble means, because he reduced their debts as much as 50%.

As the parable draws to a close, Jesus speaks directly to his audience, contrasting his disciples--the children of light--with those firmly entrenched in this present ("evil") age. He encourages the children of the light to be as shrewd with their wealth as the "children of this age," with their worldly pursuits. He urges us to use "dishonest wealth"--meaning "worldly riches"--to further God's Kingdom. For everything we have belongs to the Lord. We are called to be stewards--caretakers, managers-- of God's gifts to us, using all that we have and all that we are to welcome, befriend and win souls for the Lord, securing for them "eternal homes."

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Deb, Tyce and Jaycee's grandmother, called me a couple of days ago and I shared how I ran into her grandchildren while I was visiting their ACA classroom. Tyce's teacher said he had been talking about the church supper ever since that first Tuesday night, telling all the other kids about it. Deb said she couldn't believe how much her kids ate that night--especially Jacey, who gobbled down Carl's meatloaf, but won't touch meatloaf at home. She was sorry to miss the supper last Tuesday because of her meeting, but her husband thought it was great. She has been telling others about our suppers, though she attends another church regularly. She gave me permission to share her family's story because she wants our congregation to know how grateful she is for our ministries to children and families, such as Kids Klub, which meets social and emotional needs for her special needs grandkids. She worried that because a large crowd hadn't stayed for our first two Tuesday night

suppers, we might think they were not worthwhile. For her family, she said, they are “an answer to prayer.”

Friends, we may not be a large congregation compared to some, but we are a church with a heart to love people and help those in need.

Through your giving of your time and talents, energy and enthusiasm --you are keeping our ministries going and growing--furthering God’s Kingdom purposes! Through your prayers and financial support, you tell all the world whom you love--God, not wealth.

You are faithful in little, faithful in much.

Let us pray.

Loving Lord, thank you for your grace that covers all our sins! Thank you for giving so generously to our church--pouring our your Spirit so we would have an abundance of gifts, talents, and resources to use for your salvation purposes. Help us, Lord, to reach out to our near neighbors with kindness and compassion, welcoming and winning new friends so they may secure eternal homes. Stir us to give generously from all that we have and all that we are, not seeking anything but your peace in return. Bless us with your joy and laughter as we take creative risks with our ministries--seeking to grow them and your Kingdom, this day and forevermore. Amen.