

Luke 16:1-13 (NRSV)

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 accounting 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 wealth."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Back at my home congregation there was a woman named Melinda. She's a pretty lady, with a very straight face but every so often she would say the funniest things. You'd know they were coming because she'd get a little twinkle in her eye, and then, all of a sudden, with a real straight face she'd tell some wonderful story or make the cutest joke. As I think about she reminds me of our own John Hoffman, who I've been thinking about a lot lately. I always listen carefully to John, because I'm never sure whether he was going to say that we were going to build a new building or I was getting a pay cut or telling some cute story. With Melinda it was the same way.

Well, one day she was assigned lector and was reading the story of Abraham bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom – if you want to look it up, the story is in the 18th chapter of Genesis. Remember the story goes on and on. God is mad at Sodom and is sounding like a grumpy old bear and says, “But if I find even 50 righteous people, I'll forgive the city.” Well, Melinda gets this twinkle in her eye, and says for Abraham, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And as Melinda told the story you could see God kind of shake his shoulders and grumble a little and say, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” And Melinda gets this little smile and Abraham gets God to agree to a minimum 40 righteous people. And Abraham goes on: “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” And God answers, kind of weary and resigned, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” Well, the bargaining goes on, round after round and by the end, Abraham has bargained God down to sparing the town if his investigating angels can find even 10 righteous people. As the story turns out, they couldn't even find that many, but you could hardly blame that on Abraham – he'd certainly done his part.

But here's the thing – Melinda taught me a terribly important lesson the day she read this story to us. This story is, at the same time, both a very funny and a very serious story. It's a funny story in that you can hear Abraham bargaining with God. You can see the creator of the universe, the master of all that is and was and ever will be acting like a grumpy old grandfather who wants to be mad at these youngsters who are making him so crazy, but at the same time loves them so much that he just can't bear to give them the spanking they deserve. And yes, it's a serious story – God's justice is not to be withheld forever, the day comes when we answer for what we do.

And you can see how this story was communicated down the ages, perhaps a wise old woman or man telling an audience of children and more than a few grown-ups about what happened to old Sodom that used to be down the hill. You know, we don't actually know where Sodom was – probably it was at the bottom of what is now the Dead Sea. And I can imagine someone like Melinda centuries ago pointing down the hill to the Dead Sea and telling the kids what happened to an evil town that made God angry, and that even though Father Abraham pleaded for them and bargained for them and yes, even connived for them a little, when you've done wrong, there are going to be consequences. And as I heard this story, I thought, yeah, I could travel with these believers, they have a sense of humor, a sense of what is important, these are real people talking about real things.

As I remember Melinda or any of the many Bible stories I've heard from this pulpit and pulpits like it, I'm reminded how powerful the job of the lector is, how important it is. You'll probably notice that I never take out my bulletin and read along with the lector, because I want to hear that reading fresh out of that lector's lips, hear them say it as fresh as the communion bread, a story cooked up just for me. Next time you're the lector, keep in mind that it's your job to make the Bible come alive for another

generation of believers who've never heard this story before quite the way you're going to tell it.

That's why I hope I did justice to the Gospel reading today, because this is a story that feels to me like one of those great stories from the Older Testament like Abraham or Joseph or Daniel and the lion's den. The stage is set, there's been a complaint about a corrupt manager and the rich man calls him in and rumbles, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Well, if you've never heard anything like this in real life, consider yourself lucky. This poor manager doesn't even think to defend himself. What am I going to do? I'm too weak to dig, I'm ashamed to beg. Aha, he thinks. Wait a minute! I may be dishonest, but I'm not stupid! I've got lot of money – it just doesn't happen to belong to me. OK, it belongs to the rich fellow, but frankly he's a lost cause anyway, he's going to fire me. He said so.

What I can do, the dishonest manager thinks, is to make a few friends that I may need later. So he summons in the debtors one by one, and cuts deals with each of them – you owe 100 jugs of olive oil, make it 50 and remember how I helped you out when I need a friend. And the next debtor, how much did you owe? 100 bushels of wheat? OK, make it 50 and remember who gave you this deal.

I love this story. It's a rich, funny, earthy story, a story that makes you laugh but also makes you think. And I think, again, yeah, I could travel with these people. They've got a sense of humor and a sense of what's important. But now we come to a part of the story that my friend Melinda didn't have to deal with. That's the part where two or three hundred innocent eyes look up to the pastor and ask, "Pastor, what does this story mean?"

<Good long pause here>

Pastor, are you telling us that God thinks we should steal money and give it to our friends? Are you saying that God would approve of taking money from your employer? Do you do the same thing, take our money and give it to friends? And this is where I think, you know, my back is a little sore and I wonder if I could ask Pastor Wendy to stand up and talk for a minute.

You see, sometimes we look to the Bible as a rule book, and when we do, we're usually disappointed and sometimes confused. The Bible isn't a rule book – it's a book of life, a book that tells us about life with God. It's a rich book, full of tales that make us laugh and make us cry, and make us think about the mess we make of things and how God helps us straighten them out so we can mess them up again. The story just before today's Gospel reading in Luke is the parable of the Prodigal Son and today's lesson isn't very different from that one. God doesn't love everything we do, far from it – but God loves us, and God gives us a way, God always gives us a way to come back to God, to come back to the family of God. It doesn't mean there are no consequences for what we do. Linda pointed out to me, the story doesn't say whether the dishonest manager is still fired anyway. I can sure imagine the owner saying, "Well, that was pretty clever, but you're still out of here."

But what it does say is that this God we worship, the God who speaks to us in and through the Bible, is a God who is rich in wisdom, who knows us inside out, who knows how to tell a story like my friends Melinda and John, with a little twinkle in his metaphorical eye, a God who loves us through and through. I could follow a God like that. Yes, I could.

Amen.