PROPER 20, PENTECOST 18, SEPTEMBER 21, 2025

The parable in today's gospel has to be the most bizarre story Jesus ever told. A business owner finds out that his office manager is guilty of mismanagement. He calls in the manager and says "You've got two weeks to get ready for an audit. Now get out of here."

The manager knows he's in deep trouble. He's too proud to beg; too weak to work; so what is he to do? Suddenly, he has an idea. He calls in some of the company's biggest customers. "Have I got a deal for you?" he says. The plan is simple. He cuts their bills in half, destroys the paper trail and writes new invoices.

Now when the audit happens, no one can prove that he cheated and all the men in town will owe him a favor. His future is secure. Of course, when the owner looks at the doctored books he knows what has happened but there is nothing he can do about it. He knows he has been conned. And here's the surprise. He says to the man:" I have to admit it, you were pretty smart. You got me. Now get out of here."

This is a head scratcher because why does it seem that Jesus is commending someone's dishonesty, or "shrewdness," for the sake of saving his own behind. On the surface it looks like Jesus is inviting us to celebrate a conman who was about to get fired and who cooked the books in order to save his reputation by offering favors to the clients and setting himself up for opportunities and prospects once he was out of a job.

But that can't be it, can it? This is mind boggling. Is Jesus telling us to be dishonest? What is he really suggesting? Certainly not to be unethical but I do think he is suggesting we can learn some things from the office managers shrewdness.

Remember, the office manager or dishonest steward as he's known in the story is facing a crisis. He is being fired because he has squandered his boss's property. Instead of crumbling under the pressure of that crisis he takes decisive action. He forgives a large portion of what is owed by his boss's debtors. He makes friends for himself by reducing their debt but he also made their world a little more just for all the debtors.

However, when you look at it from the boss's perspective, the steward's shrewdness has put him in a good light because ultimately by lowering the people's debt the people see the boss as being very magnanimous. The steward was shrewd, daring and willing to sacrifice to change the outcome. Have you ever had to be shrewd to change the outcome of a situation and in the process make yourself look good?

There is an amusing story told about a young man who ran for Congress some years ago in Oklahoma. Many people thought he would win easily since he was an All-American at Duke who married a Miss America finalist after graduating from Harvard Divinity School. He was young, handsome, and idealistic, and a perfect subject for Madison Avenue wizardry. A television commercial was designed which pictured the man and his wife walking hand-in-hand through an Oklahoma pasture. As they walked, they looked soulfully upward at the sky to the accompaniment of soft music with the words running across the screen, "A Better Tomorrow for all Oklahomans."

The incumbent was a good ole country boy and he knew he was in for a tough fight. But he scheduled only a forty-second answer to his opponents commercial. He looked into a camera and said, "I may not have a fancy degree from Harvard like young

so and so, but I do know enough not to look at the sky when I am walking in a cow pasture."

He won the election as he proved himself shrewd in the political arena. We applaud business shrewdness because, let's face it, when we view this story through the lens of capitalism we absolutely applaud this man's business acumen. And it's obvious shrewdness is a major theme of the story Jesus tells in today's gospel. But there is more to this parable than just Jesus telling us that we should be shrewd and decisive and take action. Jesus wants more from us than that. And what is that? And what is it that this dishonest steward does that makes him a good guy in the end?

Let's look at it from a different angle. Maybe Jesus is telling us we need to be shrewd if we are going to serve God well in this world of ours. He's telling us we need to be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel.

So, what if the "shrewd, dishonest steward" was being creative and crafty with the riches of the master's or really God's kingdom. And if that's the case then the riches and resources of which he speaks aren't oil or wheat or property at all, but things like love and mercy, empathy, justice and humility, repentance and forgiveness, and so on?

What if the parable is about the dishonest steward being stingy with God's blessings and God sees how he has squandered all the blessings of forgiveness, grace, mercy, empathy and love that God so lavishly bestowed on him? Then God tells him you aren't one of my disciples because you've been so stingy with the gifts I gave you. The steward realizes that he has not earned any of those things that God showered upon him. So, now he recognizes this is all about relationships and he needs to have a change of heart so he can be kind, generous and forgiving to everyone he has encountered. So, he brings in everyone that he has cheated and tells them "Your God is a gracious, loving God of forgiveness and mercy. Receive the good news of that, go on your way, sin no more and return the favor of this kind of forgiveness to someone in your life."

I think we are being asked to be shrewd and generous to a fault with the things of God's kingdom which is forgiveness, grace, love, justice, empathy and mercy. The householder steps back in at the end and he praised the steward because the steward did something right even with these less-than-pure motives. The steward oddly became an agent of God's justice for the poor. And then, the householder added one more thing — bring your heart in line with your mental shrewdness.

We might paraphrase the householder's final speech: You did the right thing for the wrong reasons. How much greater would it be if you understood that you still had used my wealth to get ahead, to placate your own fears and greed, and that money was still your ultimate master. Don't do the right thing accidentally. Change your heart, too. Because, ultimately, you can only follow one path — you must embrace the love of God and neighbor or continue to serve and save yourself through mammon.

And I wonder if that might be Jesus' point with the parable. Maybe the story is about money, but only in-so-far as we see how money doesn't matter much in God's economy, unless or until it's being used to bless and benefit God's children in life-giving ways. But grace, forgiveness, justice, mercy and the love of our God is all about relationships. And Jesus is inviting us to be extravagantly careless with God's generosity, to give it away – recklessly, with abandon, in ways that go against conventional wisdom.

We are to give as Jesus gave, forgive as Jesus forgave, and to love as Jesus loves us. For the more you offer freely the grace, mercy, and compassion that all our

neighbors need as much as we do, the more we will build up what Jesus called “true riches.” For Jesus, loving God and your neighbor is the shrewdest investment possible; everything else passes away, but God’s love never ends. Amen.