

Shrewd Saints – Kent Dunnington

Luke 16:1-13

There was an elderly Christian woman who lived in a run-down part of town. One morning, while she was having her coffee, she heard through her kitchen window the voice of what sounded like a bum, for he was reciting his woes to no one in particular. “Nothing to eat, no money, not a friend in the world,” he muttered. “I can’t go on like this,” he said.

The elderly woman was poor herself, but she went to her purse and retrieved a ten dollar bill. Quickly, she wrote a note and attached it with a paper clip to the bill. When she stepped out to hand the money to the man, he seemed startled, and, saying nothing, shuffled away. On the note she had written two words: “Don’t despair.”

Later that evening, she heard a knock at the door. She put on her slippers, came down the stairs, and opened the door. She was surprised to see the old bum standing at her door, smiling. The man handed back her money. “It’s yours to keep,” she said. “I’ve got more than enough now,” he said. “You were right about “Don’t Despair.” I went to the tracks today, and Don’t Despair paid 10 to 1. I’m rich!”

When it comes to what we ought to do with our money, misunderstanding abounds. Our gospel text for today is a parable about money, and it, too, is easy to misunderstand. The story that Jesus tells is simple enough.

There is a wealthy landowner who has a financial manager. The manager is well-cared for; he lives in the master’s home. The manager keeps his master’s accounts, collecting the debts owed by his master’s tenants. But this is a dishonest manager. He is always charging the tenants more than they owe, lining his own pockets with the excess. When the master catches wind of what the manager is doing, he calls the manager into his office. “I know what you’re getting up to,” he says, “and you’re through here. Tomorrow you pack your bags.”

The dishonest manager is now in a bind. He has no friends, nor does he have skills to survive away from his master’s care. In a flash, he makes a shrewd business decision. In the remaining hours he has left as official business manager, he rounds up his master’s debtors one by one and slashes their debts by bucketfuls. Now, he thinks, when I am thrown out on my ear, these people will let me stay in their homes, for I have treated them with great kindness. In a surprising twist, the wealthy master commends the shrewdness of this dishonest manager.

What is the meaning of this parable? What is Jesus trying to tell us, his disciples? Perhaps the parable means that, morally compromised though it may be, we are to embrace the world of money and finance, of cutting deals and getting ahead. Perhaps Adam Smith and the prophets

of the free market are right: in the end, you do the most for everyone by pursuing your own rational self-interest. After all, Jesus praises the dishonest manager! Even more, he calls us to emulate the dishonest manager!

Finally, there is some good news for those of us who know how to get ahead! Sure, economic life is not pure, but what matters is that you play the game. It's okay to get your hands a little dirty, so long as you use some of your money for a good cause. Don't worship your money, sure, but for goodness sake, don't be all moralistic about living wages and fair trade and all that. Well, I am sorry to break it, but this line of interpretation is one long adventure in missing the point. But, don't despair.

The crucial verse for interpreting the parable is verse eight. Two different voices are represented within the verse, first the voice of the wealthy master: "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." Then the voice of Jesus: "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light."

Nowhere does Jesus commend the dishonesty of the manager. Rather, he commends the shrewdness of the manager. In verse ten, in fact, Jesus condemns all dishonesty, no matter how seemingly trivial. The use of the phrase "dishonest wealth" in verses nine and eleven is not a concession to the inevitable necessity of immoral business practices. Rather, the phrase, which was common in Jewish usage, is meant to point out the seductive and corrupting influence that money can have.

The manager is a moral example not because of his financial dishonesty but rather because, when he was visited by his master, he acted shrewdly. Jesus is telling his disciples that they should act just as shrewdly when they are visited by their Master, their Lord.

And what is a shrewd disciple to do with his money? The very notion that Jesus is calling us to be shrewd is a bit jarring to our sensibilities; isn't the prospect of a shrewd saint a bit of an oxymoron? In our day, shrewdness is associated with financial cunning, but this is not its central meaning. Shrewdness is wisdom. The shrewd person is the one who knows where she is going and wisely determines how best to get there.

I recently told one of my students that, unless he thought it likely that there would be NFL scouts present, he would be wiser to miss his football game and go on a mandatory class trip. Apparently insulted, he student dropped the class. I hope I am wrong, but I am afraid he was not very shrewd.

So, again, what is a shrewd saint to do with his money? Thankfully, Jesus gives an answer. We are to make friends. This seems a bit trite and ordinary coming from the guy who elsewhere is heard calling people to give all of their money to the poor. After all, unless you are just a total

tightwad, it's not terribly difficult to spend your money on friends. Now this is a stewardship plan I can get in line with!

But the verse doesn't stop there. We are to make friends with a purpose. We are to make friends so that, when our money is long gone, they will welcome us into the eternal homes. Who exactly are these friends with eternal homes?

This is the crux of the parable. And the parable suggests that the homes may belong to those who we deem insignificant or lowly. But where the parable is merely suggestive, Jesus is crystal clear. If you have been listening at all to this man Jesus, there can be no misunderstanding about who inherits the eternal homes:

"The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (1:52).

"Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry, blessed are you who weep, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20-21).

"The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried" (16:22).

"When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be repaid at the resurrection" (14:13-14).

There are many rooms in heaven, but all of the homes belong to the poor. The homes belong to the widows and the orphans, the prisoners and the immigrants, the mentally ill and the physically disabled, the bums and the prostitutes.

On that day when you arrive in the city of God, what will they say as you walk past their doors?

"There goes a new one. Do you recognize her?" "No, never saw her before."

"What about him, does he look familiar?" "No, can't say that he does."

"There goes another. Seen her?" "Oh yeah, I recognize her, but I can't say we've ever spoken. She used to go to that little white church in town, what was it called? But I never saw her over on our side of town."

"Now there's one that looks familiar." "Well I'll declare! That's my friend! Do you remember when the devil had me and I couldn't find a way to get free of the bottle? That fellow would always come around to talk. He used to take me to get a sandwich when I was so strung out I couldn't see straight. Yeah, that's my friend. Holler at him and tell him to come in and put his feet up."

What will they say about you on that great day? Will they let you pass by? Will they call you in to sit awhile? Will they put the sheets on the bed and your clothes in the closet and ask you to stay for eternity?

How tragic it would be to have a mansion on earth but to end up homeless for all eternity. "And I tell you, make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Amen.