

Have you ever been suckered by someone shrewd? So shrewd that you can only admire his shrewdness? Before I got married, I once attended a trade fair for computers and entered a whole lot of the draws that are always there. The next week there was a knock at the door with a man standing there with my prize - one of those plastic cutting boards. The moment that he was handing it to me I knew I had been suckered. Of course, everyone who entered won - we also won a filter queen vacuum demonstration. I had to admire his shrewdness, even so much as to give him a go at his demonstration.

I imagine today's gospel as something like that. The owner comes back to settle accounts with a manager he has heard rumours about and is faced with a man at least as shrewd as the owner himself, and he is impressed. It is hard to get angry with someone who shows such creativity and shrewdness. I suspect we are more scandalized by the story than the owner was who was had. Why is that? Do we identify most clearly with the owner? Is it because of the blatant dishonesty? The owner didn't seem so concerned so why should we?

Money has become a much more high-profile commodity than it was ever meant to be. Personal property is ultimately that which we have to provide us food and shelter. Money is simply a convenient form to carry our property with us, a convenient and easy means of payment and giving change. It has become much more than that. Throughout Luke, Jesus talks often about possessions and the way in which we can become so preoccupied with them. He tells the story of the rich young ruler who is blinded by his possessions and cannot continue his road to discipleship unless he unburdens himself. Jesus tells of the prodigal son where both brothers were preoccupied with possessions - one to squander, the other to hoard. Jesus's message is

always that true repentance and faith will dramatically change the way a follower of Christ thinks and acts with regards to material possessions. Possessions are of worth according to how they are used for the greater good. A disciple comes to realize that money cannot get him things that are important, but that Christ can.

Money has become a score card, whoever has the most is ahead. The athlete paid the most, is the best. Who needs \$15 million a year to live, or \$10 million? We keep score with each other as we consider how big a house we have, the car, the vacations. We store it up even as we know that we can't take it with us. We hoard it even when we know we have more money than we can possibly spend in the years we have left. The result being that many families are torn apart fighting over that nest egg that had so much importance while we were alive and now causes such pain once we are gone. Now, the dishonest manager, he knew this... and did something about it. The money he had was not going with him so he used it for something that would last - friendship. Every Christian is in the same boat as this man. For we, like him, are facing the certain and impending end of all our material resources.

I have a friend whose father-in-law bought a cabin and a big boat at a lake. He did it specifically so that his children and grandchildren had a place to play and where he could enjoy them playing. He had no interest in giving them money after he died, he wanted to use his money now when they could share the enjoyment of what it could provide. Shrewd.

We don't like to talk about money in church. Why is that? Is it because it has a greater control over all of us than we would like to admit? That which is essentially neutral has taken on a life of its own. It has awesome power to control which Jesus recognized and continues to be true today. Money is to

be a tool and not a master. It has no value in itself, it takes on value, negative or positive, according to how we use it.

One writer says that there is a kind of piety based on what might be called dinky-ism. The dinkier it is the more Christian it is bound to be. Many people think that dinky-ness is next to godliness.

The author Garrison Keillor writes about growing up in a home filled with Christian devotion. He says that one of the cardinal rules of being a Christian was that you always bought the cheapest brand. And whenever you ate in a restaurant, you always ordered the cheapest thing on the menu. The same thing applied to church, he says. The small congregation in Lake Wobegon did not go for pricey things like churches with high vaulted ceilings, fancy vestments, and more candles around the altar than at a birthday party for an octogenarian. He says he grew up envying the Catholics and Father Emil for their extravagant displays of ecclesiastical finery. There were many times, he admits, when he wished that just once his own church would cut loose from its pietism and something really outlandish.

Martin Luther spoke of extravagance in response to one of the reformers who introduced radical liturgical reform to simplify the liturgy and began to purge the church of art and vestments. Carlstadt denounced these things as opulent and therefore pagan. Luther spoke in favour of the adornments. For Luther the gospel was primary. Extravagance in the service of human pride is clearly wrong but extravagance in the service of God is commendable.

Why not use money to make friends as the manager in the parable? That is something that will last. Why not use money in the service of other people? That will last. Why not use money to provide ministry to people in our community - people who would experience the love of Christ through us?

Money would be serving God, money that would have an effect long after it was spent.

Jesus commends the manager and adds a comment, "for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light." You can hear a "if only" in that statement. If only the children of the light were so creative to spread the light.

Remember the story of the four men in the gospels who brought a sick friend to Jesus for healing. They had to tear up the roof of someone's house in order to let him down. Imagine the scene - the owner of the house looking up at his ceiling as a hole is being made in it directly over Jesus. I wonder what he is thinking. You can almost see the four men taking a collection among themselves to repair the roof, but now it was more important to get their sick friend to Jesus. Now that is creative!

The story is told of a famous preacher visiting the home of a very wealthy Christian. On one occasion, at family prayers in the morning, the rich man prayed eloquently for the missionaries in other lands. When he had finished, his teen-age son said to him, "Dad, I like to hear you pray for missionaries." His dad said, "Well, son, I am glad to hear that." And the boy said, "But do you know what I was thinking while you were praying? I thought, 'If I had your bank book I would answer half of your prayers.'"

When we take our offertory prayer seriously, it makes a difference how we look at money and what we can do with it.

"Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. We offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made."

Imagine what we could do with a little creative shrewdness. Imagine if our wealth became a major opportunity to create that which will last. To lay

up lasting treasures in heaven, to help people who have never experienced the love of God to experience that love through you and me. Imagine if people in our community equated Christians with an extravagance aimed at helping other people. Imagine what we could do in this neighbourhood if we were able to put the accumulated wealth that is sitting unused, toward meeting the needs around us.

The manager in the parable worked the system. Jesus said that he worked the system better than children of the light. Have you ever noticed that virtually no obstacle will stop a person on his mission up the economic ladder. Every challenge can be overcome by ingenuity and shrewdness. Setbacks are just temporary. Problems are only an incentive to be more creative.

That is what Jesus is talking about in this parable. The children of this world know how to use all their talents and energies to achieve the goal of their system. They attach more zeal to their pursuits, which ultimately disappear, than do the children of the light.

So here is the bottom line. If you want a summary of this parable in modern day terms: As a dearly beloved child of God, one who is redeemed from this fallen world, destined for eternal life with God, with only a limited amount of time and energy at your disposal, put more energy and effort into building God’s eternal kingdom than billionaires put into their empires.