



## "DISCIPLE: Accountability"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 3

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 16:1-13

*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."*

This is a Bible story for accountants. I know there are a few of you out there. And thank God for you. I say that because, although my Dad was an accountant, I didn't inherit any of those genes. This church needs you, the world needs you and the skills you have, to keep the numerically-challenged ones of us from making a big mess of things.

Now, of course, if you know something about the numbers or even if you just read the news headlines, you know that there are accountants, and there are accountants. There are legal ways of keeping the books, and not-so-legal approaches. There are ethical ways of showing the numbers, and decidedly less-than-ethical ways of doing so.

So when I say we in the church are counting on you accountants out there, it's not just to keep the books for us. It's to help us all make certain that the numbers add up to reflect our values and priorities. To make sure that our accounts pass muster when viewed through the framework of discipleship.

And in that sense, you see, we're all called to give an accounting of our lives and our stewardship of all that has been entrusted to us. Does what we do with our resources give glory to God? Does how we treat others out of what has been entrusted to us value them as beloved children of God? Are we fair? Are we trustworthy? Do we seek the welfare of the least and the last?

This is a story for all disciples about accounts and accountability.

The story we heard Dan read from Luke's Gospel is not an easy or transparent one. I thought this might be another of those Sundays when you all would be justified in responding cautiously to the reading of the Gospel—with something of a tentative "Thanks be to God?"

Dan read it well. Don't blame him! Because for centuries, this story known as the "Parable of The Unjust Steward" has challenged biblical scholars and faithful followers alike. What are we to make of it? Are we to admire someone who seems to make hay using dishonest wealth? Probably not, knowing everything else Jesus taught about money. But what in the world is this passage all about? I just read a commentary on it written by no less than a professor of religion and literature at Yale Divinity School in which even he wonders "what in the world the master storyteller [Jesus] has in mind in telling such a confusing tale."

So let's see what we've got here.

You know, we United Methodists are not "the Bible says it--I believe it--that settles it." kind of people. We teach that the Scriptures contain the Word of God. And that means that it's our job as disciples to unpack it, to study it, to pray about it, to discern about it, in order to discover what truth is contained in any particular passage. So let me encourage you to take advantage of our weekly 9:00 a.m. gathering in the Fireside Room each Sunday where you can discuss the Scriptures assigned for the day's worship.

So we ask--what truth does this story contain?

It helps our research on this passage to know that this parable contains a cobbled-together bunch of teachings, some directed to the disciples, some to the Pharisees, on the general topic of "riches." No wonder it's confusing.

A big clue is found in the verses that appear on the cover of the Order of Worship today: "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?" This is a story about accounting and accountability.

This parable causes us to explore questions that Jesus addresses over and over again: what is the wise use of possessions and money? Or to put it another way, rather than squandering all the resources God so lavishly bestows upon us, rather than prioritizing them for ourselves alone, how might we be shrewd and generous in our use of all the gifts God entrusts to us?

If you're already asking yourself these questions, I encourage you to check out Financial Peace University, which is being offered again this Fall. If you're already wrestling with or if you've wondered how to make the most of what you have, how to set priorities, or to develop a budget, how to get out of credit card debt or save for your child's college education, or how to provide for yourself and your family and still be able to give generously and share with others from that which has been entrusted to you.

We offer this class as a resource for you and your family. People who have taken it swear by it. And we offer this class because, for all of us, how we prioritize and live as faithful stewards of that which has been given to us is central to who we are as disciples. The teachings of Jesus hold us accountable for all that is entrusted to us. Our personal accounting must be done in light of our accountability as disciples. Because finally it's really all about the Kingdom of God and our place in it and the new kind of ethics and morals and how wealth is to be used to benefit all, the new economy that Jesus has come to teach.

How will we choose to use our time, our money, our talents—all the resources God entrusts to us? As we baptize Olivia Elise this morning, as we receive Mike, Raphael and Phil into membership, we all pledge anew to uphold the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. We vow, if you will, to live as wise and generous stewards of our time, our money, our prayer, our powers of persuasion in the world God so loves to build the Kingdom of God, because God, through Christ Jesus, is holding us accountable. How will we do that? What priorities will we set? How do we do it when it comes to the various kinds of "wealth" we possess? How do we, as disciples, serve the Kingdom goal, of abundant life for all?

The Sacrament of Baptism and the Reception of New Members we celebrate today remind us that, as disciples, we don't walk this walk alone, but we do it in the company of fellow disciples who encourage us and help hold us accountable. This reality of what the church can be for us was brought home for me early on in my ministry.

My first appointment was as Campus Minister at the University of Delaware. I was frequently invited to preach in churches all across the then Peninsula Conference of The United Methodist Church. One Sunday, I preached in a Native American UM church. Much to my surprise, after the offering was collected, a long period followed in which music was sung, announcements were made, and so forth. It seemed as though we were vamping for time, though I didn't know what was going on. After awhile, the Head Usher came back in. They had not only counted the morning's offering, they reported out, by name, how much each member had given that day. This took awhile. Although it was a custom unfamiliar to me, it was obviously something they did every week. I'll tell you—I wasn't the only one squirming in my chair. I was really glad that I had thought ahead and brought my offering and put it in the plate. My name, the visiting preacher—my name and the amount of my offering was read, too.

That Sunday, however, evidently the results were not satisfactory. Once all the names had been read, the plates were passed again. Again we waited. More music. Until the Head Usher came back in and nodded to the pastor, signaling, I assumed, that everyone had finally stepped up. The service concluded—finally—and out we went to the Coffee Hour.

Don't worry. We're not going to institute that practice here anytime soon. But the point is well taken, isn't it? Together, in community, within the fellowship of the church, before the sight of God, as disciples we are held accountable for how we live as wise stewards, as faithful stewards, of all that has been entrusted to us.

How do we do this? The Message translation puts it like this in Romans 12:1: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering."

We are accountable for our lives, our everyday lives, everything about them. Accountable as disciples of Christ Jesus in all that we say and do and share and give.

This is the journey we are on together this Fall. It will at times be intensely personal, if we let the questions penetrate our careful armor. But at all times, it will also be a shared journey. This is precisely why God created the church. The church—into which new disciples are baptized and new members received. The church--the community of faithful disciples who bear witness, who point to truth, who embody hope, who serve the least of the least, who persevere in prayer, who give generously, who are known by their love of one another and of all God's children, who defend the creation, who seek the paths of peace and justice. The church—which helps hold us accountable to the vows, the commitments, the promises we make.

The church—the community of faith that helps make it possible for us to hear, when our days on earth are accomplished, to hear Christ's word of blessing: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Amen.

Notes:

The DISCIPLE sermon series is drawn from the work of Martin Thielen in A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

Peter S. Hawkins "Reflections on the Lectionary." The Christian Century. August 31, 2016.

Sharon Ringe. Luke. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

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