

**Managers of True Riches**  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
19 September 2004  
**Text: Luke 16:1-13**

*Have you ever been in a place so loud your whole body shook? Have you ever hugged a total stranger? Have you ever been part of something incredible?*

--so read the recent Plain Dealer ad for...no, not Fairmount Church, but the Cleveland Cavaliers. An invitation – and a compelling one at that!—to attend a game at the Gund. But in a way, I thought it wasn't a bad description of the Church at its best: praising God in lively worship, building community with people who are different from us, and participating in an almost-unbelievable venture fulfilling a larger purpose. Sometimes I think the problem with the church is not so much that we oversell its claims, but that we undersell them. When was the last time you heard the church described as a place that could rock your world, that could evoke spontaneous acts of warmth and kindness, could make your heart beat faster? What a contrast to the pale, cold, self-important image too frequently conjured up in reference to the church's public face!

No one could ever accuse Jesus of downplaying the faith—either its claims or its demands. *Love your enemies.* he said. *The Kingdom of God is within you. Follow me.* And in today's text, *You cannot serve God and wealth.* No, we could never say that the way, the truth, and the life Jesus came to show us was smooth, bland, or insignificant. Our gospel reading this morning is puzzling nevertheless, because it seems to suggest that faith is also a matter of shrewd investment, of using unrighteous methods to obtain a righteous reward, as if the ends justify the means. Luke places this story within the context of Jesus' friendship with "tax collectors and sinners"—those people scorned by religious leaders but who flocked to hear the Teacher. Perhaps it was this contrast that prompted Jesus to use humor to make his point, understanding how a joke can go a long way toward softening people's defensiveness. So let us hear God's word in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, chapter 16, beginning with the first verse. Imagine Jesus taking us all into his gaze, and with a little smile playing at the corners of his mouth, beckoning us to come close: "Let me tell you a story....." [Luke 16:1-13]

The story is told of a man who had a weak heart, so that when his family learned that he had the winning lottery ticket worth millions, they feared to tell him lest the news give him a heart attack. So they sought the help of their priest who assured them he would do the needful. "Tell me, my son," said Father Murphy. "If God, in his mercy, were to send you 30 million dollars, what would you do?" The man replied, "Why, I'd immediately give half of it to the Church, Father." Unfortunately, it was Father Murphy who had the heart attack.

...and perhaps also the religious leaders of Jesus' day upon hearing the punch line of this parable. We have a manager charged with "squandering" his master's property. We don't know if that meant outright embezzlement or merely mismanagement (or even if the charges were true!). He loses his job, and is called to turn in the books. Aware that his accounts are coming due, the manager has to make a plan now. He's too proud to go on welfare, and the minimum wage job is out of the question. What to do, what to do? And he decides to cook the books. That's what he does. He applies creative bookkeeping and lets the clients pay a percentage of what they owe; a little discount if you will, that he hopes will provide him with some markers he can call in down the road.

And when the boss finds out, he is overjoyed! He praises the fired manager for his astuteness, his prudence, his effective, if morally suspect action. The condemned is commended! The so-called "unjust manager" is lifted up as an example of shrewdness to the "children of light." Careful here!—don't let the irony of this parable get obliterated by crude literalism. Jesus isn't saying that "anything goes," or advocating unethical practices. He doesn't suggest that the dishonest manager be rewarded for his dishonesty. I think he's praising him for not giving up on his own power to make the world a better place; in fact, for using the power he has to create a better outcome. Jesus seems to imply that it isn't our powerlessness that is our problem; it's the God-given power we *neglect* to use that constitutes our dishonesty. [*I am indebted to Virginia Miner who makes this point in her film review of "Bruce Almighty" in Lectioary Homiletics, August 2004*]

If the dishonest manager went to such great lengths to find a workable solution to his material predicament, why do the children of light give up so easily on their spiritual pursuit of good? How might the outcomes of the challenges we face as church and congregation be changed if we would apply similar savvy, similar imagination, similar purposiveness to them? Do we sometimes sell the greatness of our faith short by half-hearted effort, intellectual laziness, and lack of persistence? We sometimes hear Jesus' words

"You cannot serve God and wealth" as judgment, and we do well always to consider the ways in which we "are rich in things and poor in soul." And yet I believe they additionally offer a word of grace, an invitation to a way of life so compelling that it calls for our full attention, our single-minded devotion.

Today we will ordain and install elders and deacons, and dedicate trustees whom we believe have been called by God to serve the Church. Along with our staff, these men and women make up the leadership team of our church. They will make awesome promises to serve with "energy, intelligence, imagination, and love," and in so doing, affirm their commitment to employ all their considerable talents and powers in pursuit of Christ's mission. They will help us teach our children, witness to the good news of salvation, extend compassion to those in need; they will help us balance our budget and use our considerable resources wisely and faithfully. I hope they will take this text to heart. Not, of course, in deception or waste, but making full use of their skills and vision to lead this church into the good future God intends. They are managers of true riches, committed to investing them in nothing less than the mission of God, to re-make earth as it is in heaven. A transformed place where justice flows down like the waters of a mighty river. Where enemies embrace and live together in peace. In which children do not live in poverty, but thrive from abundance of bread and love and opportunity. Friends, is anything less than our best worthy of such a mission?

Have you been to a place so alive your whole body shook with joy? Have you hugged a stranger who has become a friend? Are you part of this incredible enterprise of divine grace and purpose? You can be. And it doesn't cost you a thing. Just your life. Just your whole life.

TO THE GOD OF GRACE, WHO CALLS YOU TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

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