

“Using What We Have” Luke 16:1-9 Trinity 9 2021

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Have you ever had a bad day? Of course you have. But, I am willing to bet that it wasn't as bad a day as the day described by Jesus in the parable in our Gospel lesson this morning. That man was having a really bad day. Jesus tells the parable to make the point about using what you have to the best effect. I want to take you through the lesson and discuss that point. Our theme is, “Using What You have.”

In order to make sense of the parable, you need to remember a couple of facts about what Jesus refers to as a “steward” in our Gospel. In English, we might call someone in his position a manager or an administrator. In the day and culture of Jesus' Israel, the office was called, in Aramaic, a “shaliak”. A Shaliak would be a manager with extraordinary authority, from the twenty-first century perspective. He could make deals that his master did not approve of, and the deal was made as surely and with the same authority as though the master had done it himself. That is why the “squandering” of the master's possessions was such a serious thing. His employer had no recourse to recover mismanaged funds.

Everyone in Jesus' day would have known this. This is just how things worked back then. What was happening was something like what happened to Joe Louis, when his managers squandered all that he had earned, and the champ was left penniless, and so had to keep fighting just to make a living, day to day. Unlike Joe Louis, the master in the parable discovered the problem in time to keep from going broke, and when he fired the steward, the steward had to leave his employment with the shirt on his back and nothing more - unlike Joe's crooked managers, who left quite well-off.

So, the man was going from relative wealth to absolute poverty overnight. He faced reality squarely. He was not cut out for heavy labor

“Using What We Have” Luke 16:1-9 Trinity 9 2021

- probably as much due to age and long inactivity as anything, and he couldn't bear the thought of begging - which was the first century's unemployment and social security plan all rolled up into one. Back then, you worked, or you begged and depended on the generosity of the townspeople, or you starved. It was a simple equation. Just like today, the townspeople would grudgingly support a truly needy beggar or two, but if too many were to appear, the generosity of the people around the area would dry right up. Unlike today, they were often less than kind even to the beggars they happened to support. That was strange too, because their religious duty required them to be generous to the needy- so they needed beggars. But, in truth, they had an abundance of needy people around them, widows and orphans and the disabled, and they did not need or want any more.

So, our hero was not inclined to beg. He faced an existential dilemma. His conduct had deprived him of his livelihood, as the ways of the foolish often do, and he was unable or unwilling to do the things that were left open to him. When he took stock of his situation, he found himself left with only one option; lie, cheat, and steal. He could use the remaining hours of his authority over another man's riches to build a nest egg for himself at his soon-to-be-former master's expense. That is what he did.

He reduced the debts of his master's wealthier debtors by significant amounts, in all likelihood with the expressed understanding that they would owe him for his duplicity on their behalf. He certainly expected a return on his graft. That is what “so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes” meant. And when his duplicity was discovered, “his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly”. The parable doesn't tell us if he managed to keep his job, or whether his scheming worked or anything like that, because this is, after all, a parable - and

“Using What We Have” Luke 16:1-9 Trinity 9 2021

not a real recounting of historical events. The point of the story has been made, so Jesus did not need to add any more to the story.

The point is, “the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light”. People tend to exercise more intelligence and realistic thinking when they deal with the passing things of this world than Christians do dealing with the eternal realities of Christ. People manage their portfolio’s with care. They know where their money is. They calculate cash-flow and appreciation rates and almost always know how this or that action will serve their self-interest before they act. This is not universally true - there are poor people and lousy managers out there, but generally, people pay attention to their things - and generally they follow easy to understand principles for self-preservation and self-advantage. We lock our cars. We don’t loan our credit cards to strangers. We try not to create havoc for ourselves when we are thinking clearly.

Christians are not so ‘shrewd’. We often fail to live according to our theology. We say we believe something, but we often act as though we do not. We frequently value the things of this world in ways that suggest that they are more permanent and significant than they actually are, and faith, and fellowship with our fellow-believers, and doctrine, and the life of our family - the congregation - take a back seat to toys, and personal pleasures, and ideas and activities that often directly contradict our faith. Christians often have their ‘faith’ in a mental “lock-box” kept separate from how they think and how they speak and how they act in regards to life-in-general. We see Christians placing the esteem and society of the unbelieving before the people and things of our faith. And we behave as though life in this world is to be adhered to at any cost, as though the promises and hope of the Gospel are not real.

“Using What We Have” Luke 16:1-9 Trinity 9 2021

Jesus means to draw your attention to that by means of this parable. When he says, “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings”, He is addressing what we might call a disconnect between what we confess and what we actually do.

The ‘mammon of unrighteousness’ refers to the ‘stuff’ of this world. When Jesus says to make friends for yourself with it, He doesn’t mean to use it to make friends of society or people around you, but to use it in ways that are consistent with your confession.

Let’s face it, if we were to look at the church with the expectation that how we used our gifts of faith, doctrine, forgiveness, and the ‘mammon of unrighteousness’ reflected our true values, we would come away with an entirely different picture of what the Christian faith was about than what we confess that we believe. Synods and church bodies would appear to be about the accumulation of buildings and nest-eggs filled with cash and promoting a progressive social agenda in society at large. Teaching about that guy in the Bible would not appear to be a priority at all. Sound doctrine and clear confession appear to have no particular place among congregations and church bodies here. Advancing Biblical morality would seem to take a back seat to looking good in the eyes of society and garnering the esteem of the secular authorities.

Judging by their actions, congregations would appear to be having a race about size and impressive edifices, and hosting tea-parties and selling things. Sharing the good news of the grace of God, helping people to hear about their salvation, and encouraging one another to stand firm in the faith once delivered to us does not appear to dominate congregational activities very often, if ever. The most active

“Using What We Have” Luke 16:1-9 Trinity 9 2021

churches in our community give away food to anyone who wants to take it, provide clothing for those who want to wear hand-me-downs, and host concerts and other cultural events for the community. Garage sales are big. Dinner fund-raisers are common, although they rarely seem to be raising funds for the actual spread of the Gospel. We are instructed to build “evangelism” by meeting the community needs for day-care centers and alcoholic anonymous meetings. And we are told that this sort of social service is “mission work”.

Finally, individual Christians often behave as though everything else in life is more urgent than the faith - - or the other faithful. The situation reminds me of the observation that if you want to quit fishing, move to the lake. People do that, you know. They move to the thing they say they value, and then, because it is right there, they know they can do it any time, and so everything else steps in and takes its place. Before you know it, you haven't been out in a boat for years because, 'Awww, you can do that any time - so let's go do this or that today and fish tomorrow.'

The Church is here, and presumably will be next week, and next month, so the weekend visit to someone someplace else is more urgent. One 'needs' the things of life, and one can theoretically give more financial support tomorrow, so one buys things today that aren't needs, and treats the Gospel and the fellowship of the faithful like something that they might attend to when there is nothing more exciting - nothing interesting - to do. You really do care about fellow believers, but your garden, your projects, your relatives, your vacation get away's, and your (you can fill in the blank here) are urgent, and just as important as . . . , and consume your attention.

But let's face the truth: what is more important than God's Word? What do we need more than the gifts of God which He delivers to us in

“Using What We Have” Luke 16:1-9 Trinity 9 2021

worship? Who is really more important than our brothers and sisters in Christ, given to us by God to love and to care for and to encourage? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and to lose his own soul? Are we dealing with the things of Christ as we want to when we think about faith and the Gospel and such? How are you using what you have?

What Jesus is teaching by means of the parable is that we ought to be more shrewd in our dealings with the things of the world in ways that reflect and undergird our confession and our hope. We are to use the things of this world in ways that help the proclamation of the gospel, or in ways that tend toward our spiritual health - you know, like going to church and Bible Study regularly, or reading good books, or financing the preaching and teaching of the Word of God both here and in the distant parts of the mission field.

Being shrewd might suggest not throwing money at mission programs that do not actually do missions, or not allowing ourselves to be confused by the popularity of social ministries of so-called compassion and thinking that they are evangelism of some sort. Social ministries are surely good works, and we should be about helping others in such ways, but we should never confuse that with missions or evangelism. Being “shrewd in relation to your own kind” as “sons of light” means dealing with one another as beloved brothers and sisters in the household of God. That means we care about one another, and know who is hurting, and who is in need of something we can provide, and understanding – or at least thinking about – what we can do to encourage one another and help each other live lives of peace and contentment here and now as the children of God in Christ Jesus.

Our failures in regard to one another are legion - and when I preach like this, I suspect I stir up a bit of guilt. Some of you probably

“Using What We Have” Luke 16:1-9 Trinity 9 2021

think that I am preaching down to you, as though I think that I do this stuff all the way it should be, and you are the only ones to miss the mark. But it is not that way. I recognize that I am not as “shrewd” in regard to my brothers and sisters in Christ as I might be either. My only comfort is that we are, together, “sons of light”. We are the children of God, redeemed and forgiven for the sake of the death of Christ on the cross on our behalf, and His resurrection for our justification.

So, if you fall short of this shrewd stewardship of the mammon of unrighteousness, take this comfort; your sins are forgiven. But take a lesson from Jesus about using what you have. God has given you all that you possess, your time, your abilities, and your possessions and wealth, for His purposes, not merely for your own enrichment and entertainment. Think about the steward in the parable and ask yourself how will you want to have used what you have when you are called to give an account of your stewardship? You are going to go to heaven because of Christ, so that is not the question. The question is, how do you want to be using what you have, as one of God’s chosen and beloved children? He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.