

September 18, 2022 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Psalm 113, 1 Timothy 2:1-7  
Luke 16:1-13

[\[https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2365-notes-to-the-children-of-light\]](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2365-notes-to-the-children-of-light) Barbara Rossing:  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-3/commentary-on-luke-161-13-2>; Jo Bailey Wells:  
[https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2007-09/squandering-and-scattering?utm\\_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=7f2688b43a-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_SCP\\_2022-09-12&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b00cd618da-7f2688b43a-86340259](https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2007-09/squandering-and-scattering?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=7f2688b43a-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_SCP_2022-09-12&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-7f2688b43a-86340259); Patagonia: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/climate/patagonia-climate-philanthropy-chouinard.html>]

**Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen**

**There are some Sundays** when we read the gospel and it's hard to know if it's really the good news,  
Pick up your cross. Lose your life. Hate your family.  
You've heard these challenging passages.  
We've had a run of them the last few months.

**This week, though, our gospel is not just challenging, but rather, it's confusing!**

Baffling, in fact.

It makes me cock my head, *Really, Jesus?*

It makes me raises my eye-brows, *Are you sure?*

You heard it: "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth..."

This isn't what we teach our children in Sunday School!

In fact, this seems to contradict so much of what we read in the gospels.

**And we aren't alone in this confusion, in sensing what seems to be contradiction.**

For centuries, the followers of Jesus have struggled with this parable.

And when I say followers, I mean the disciples themselves and the theologians and the Bible interpreters.

This is a tricky one.

Why does Jesus applaud what seems to be dishonesty?

How is this fellow a role model for the faithful?

And what are we supposed to learn about the kingdom of heaven from today's parable?

**So, after all these centuries...** I don't have answers this morning.

What I do have are some things to consider, and then a story.

**First, Provocative.**

Jesus, it seems, likes to be provocative.

I suspect this appeals to some of you, and makes a few others a bit uncomfortable, right?

The tax collectors and sinners are leaning in to listen.

The pharisees and the scribes are grumbling...And Jesus knows it.

He knows that he has turned toward the cross, toward his death, that this is the time, this is *his* moment, and he's got something to say...

and it's a provocative *something*, not business as usual, Kumbaya, but stir the pot, shake the systems, turn the tables, provocative.

### **Second, Economics.**

Professor Barbara Rossing writes about the economics of Roman-occupied Galilee, in the first century.

The landlords, the rich folks, the rulers were, put simply: loan-sharks.

It would have been common to find incredibly high interest rates,

with each person on the ladder taking a cut,  
the poor one at the bottom buried in impossible debt.

Think pay-day lending, think other predatory lending practices that snowball.

So when the manager reduces the amount by 20%, even 50%,

he may have just been removing his cut, his share, or his share and the rich man's share,  
he may have been charging the poor one the original amount owed.

### **Third, Location.**

This parable is the fourth in a string of parables.

There's the lost sheep, and then the lost coin—Pastor Kate preached about these last week.

There's the prodigal son who is welcomed home with open arms.

And then... there's today's parable, the one that's often called the parable of the "dishonest manager."

Lost and found, that makes sense for the first three... but today's? Where's the connection?

### **And that brings me to a fourth thought: Verbs.**

Yes, verbs!

It turns out that a little, powerful, verb may be segue between these stories.

Some of you know that story of the prodigal son, how the youngest son, the lost son,  
is said to have "Squandered his property on dissolute living."

That same verb, **Squander**, comes up in today's parable, too.

"There was a rich man who had a manager,

and charges were brought to him that this man was **Squandering** his property."

In most of our bibles, this little, powerful verb is translated from the Greek as Squander.

But this verb can also be translated as Scatter.

Like to scatter, to spread around.

And while scattering can be negative, like when my papers are scattered this way and that, perhaps this is a countercultural scattering that spreads and shares, redistributes, indeed, redistributes wealth.

Maybe the manager is getting a head start on what we are told happened in Acts (4:32, 2:44), after Jesus' resurrection, when the community shares everything in common.

Maybe the key, then, is in the verbs.

Maybe he isn't squandering, but rather scattering, spreading, sharing, making friends and community.

**Keeping money moving.** That's my next thought.

And it's a thought that comes from theologian Ched Myers.

Maybe the dishonest manager is praised because he is **keeping money moving**.

He's not sitting on the nest egg.

Rather he's scattering it, sharing it,

giving it to people who need it, reducing debt, developing relationships.

God's reign, then, is built by meaningful relationships, and, quite frankly, doing things that matter.

The rich man doesn't seem worried here that he's giving away money that isn't his.

Quite the contrary, it's almost like the manger is teaching generosity to the rich man.

I can't help but think of student loan forgiveness.

Keeping money moving.

Friends, there is a liberation that comes with unsaddling ourselves and one another,

by freeing up money and cares so we can do what truly needs to be done, so we can live our values.

**Bob Dylan sang, "Gotta serve somebody."**

He knew the tension of today's gospel.

And I think he knew Jesus pointed truth at the end of this baffling parable:

"You cannot serve God and wealth."

Somehow, we must choose.

That's a hard choice when we're pushing against every voice, every day in the systems of our worldly economy.

**Finally a story. A story about wise choices.**

A story that perhaps you read or heard this week,

about the recent decisions of eccentric rock climber and Patagonia's founder Yvon Chouinard.

The New York Times explained it this way:

“Rather than selling [Patagonia] or taking it public,

Mr. Chouinard, his wife and two adult children have transferred their ownership of Patagonia, valued at about \$3 billion, to a specially designed trust and a nonprofit organization.

They were created to preserve the company’s independence and ensure that all of its profits — some \$100 million a year — are used to combat climate change and protect undeveloped land around the globe.”

What an intriguing decision—intriguing that this family could dare to make it, and intriguing and profound for its potential ripple effect.

**Friends, there’s not much straight forward in today’s baffling gospel.**

I don’t have answers, I guess I don’t have them most Sundays,

but I offer these thoughts and this story to get us thinking, praying, pondering, talking, wondering.

This world of ours, this economy of ours, is so very interconnected, and so very complicated.

AND Our decisions, they matter.

Big decisions, small decisions, they matter:

Where will I shop? What will I eat?

Who made this piece of clothing?

What are the practices of the corporation?

How does this affect the climate? What about globalization?

Whose debts can I forgive?

What does wealth equity look like?

How can we be part of scattering and sharing wealth?

How can we as a community grapple with these questions?

Children of the light: Maybe today’s parable is meant to be an invitation, an imperative, to get clear on our values,

and to stay connected to our decisions,

for they are essential to our spiritual practice, they are part of our faithful calling.

**In all this, beloved ones:**

may the Spirit’s wisdom direct you,

may hope ground you, and

may grace of Jesus Christ guide your heart, your decisions, and your feet. Amen.