



stained glass, 1475-1500
from the Victoria and Albert Museum

September 18, 2022

Luke 16:1-13

Invest in People

Prayer: Lord God, as we go through the world this week help us remember to think about what is ours, and what is other people's, and, above all, what is Yours. Help us to consider whether some of the things we think of as "ours"—the privileges, the comforts, the security—aren't, perhaps, as fully ours as we think they are. Help us be honest about our definitions of wealth so that we might prepare our hearts for the true riches you have for us. Amen.

This image is a stained glass window in the Victoria and Albert Museum created between the years 1475-1500. A merchant is at work in his warehouse or storeroom, surrounded by the tools of his trade. Standing on a wool sack, he weighs goods on a large balance using a set of standardized avoirdupois weights. The large scales are falsely balanced with ropes of different lengths. This is literally a window into business life 500 years ago. Clearly there were dishonest people in business, and someone skilled in stained glass has given you their view.

If you'll go back with me another 1500 years, this is the subject of Jesus' parable in Luke 16, dishonest business dealings. Before I get into it, I need to remind you that this is a parable. Jesus is telling a fictional story, about regular types of people most people would be familiar with. There are parables all over the Bible, fictional stories told with a moral purpose. Some are no longer than one verse, the longest is the entire book of Job.

The parable today is often called the story of the dishonest manager. But let me observe that this is not the only story Jesus tells about dishonest people, you may remember a parable about a dishonest judge who only listens to a widow because she overcomes him with her relentlessness. The judge had no inclination to give her justice, but he did anyway, just to get her out of his hair. Jesus admired that. Be like her, force justice. As you consider today's parable, I invite you to follow the money – to see the message Jesus conveys. Remember that Jesus preaches about money more than any other theme in his teaching ministry. He understands what money can and cannot do. How it reveals values.

So we begin with the manager being fired for cause, mismanagement. Making him now both dishonest and desperate. So, while he still can, he summons the debtors and settles their debts with his employer. Remember, he's fictional, so don't think too hard about his childhood or his circumstances, he is a fictional dishonest person.

What he is doing, and doing really well, is trading in one currency to bank in another. By continuing to defraud his employer, he is setting up a situation where a whole series of people will owe him favors. Favors which have value. He is investing in people, in an expectation that they will feel obligated to return the favor and look out for him when he's out of a job. He says 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." Manual labor and begging are not currencies that he can manage.

I have learned that there are other currencies besides the currency of money. But there's just three ways to use any currency: you spend it, save it, or give it away.

There is a stewardship program based on this insight, the multiple currencies that we engage in every day. You may have commitment currencies, obligations to meet a friend regularly, buy a gift, return a favor, I know some of you keep lists of who you give gifts to at the end of the year – there's currency of gifts. Most of us are more adept at using some currencies than others. There are different rules with every currency.

Money is only one currency. The question of how you manage your currencies in the world is what this parable is about. And you could be smart about it. Yes, the manager was dishonest, but he had no trouble expertly switching currencies and creating another form of wealth. A wealth of friends, having invested in these people while he had the opportunity. His employer "commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;

This is an image of a denarius. The currency in Jesus' day. You see whose head is on it?



What did Jesus say about whose this is? Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. But that's not his point. The point is to render unto God what is God's.

One of the currencies I have had a front row seat to over this summer has been the currency of hospitality as practiced by those of you who work with our Christian service team. We've had quite a few Memorial services in recent months, and many among you here have invested yourselves in providing a hospitable reception following the worship service. A space and time for people to gather, reflect, tell stories, share pictures, eat and drink. Providing hospitality creates a social debt (note the language of currency) among those who receive it.

- Some respond to this gift by giving a donation,
- some will join the group themselves,
- some will go elsewhere and do something kind for someone else,
- some will wonder how they were found worthy to be given this gift,
- some will not understand, this gift or this currency

Luke 16:10 "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much;" who are you investing in? We talk about time, talent and treasure in stewardship season. How are you spending these currencies? Saving them? Giving them away? Maybe you have figured out money, but not time or talent. Maybe talent is good but treasure and time are getting away from you. This parable encourages us to begin where we are. The dishonest manager grabbed the people and the resources closest to him and invested in a new life among these friends. You have to admire him, his employer does. Imperfect though it is. We do not have resources forever; circumstances change, windows of opportunity close.

As a congregation we have currency in this community and in the owls. Our currency is ministry, which will be what our congregation commits to. All of what goes on here has been given. Is it enough?

Fred Craddock said: The question is not whether the church is dying – the question is whether it is giving its life for the world.

As we enter this stewardship season, that is the question we will answer together.

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Congregational Church in South Glastonbury

949 Main St.

South Glastonbury, CT 06073