

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

“You cannot serve God and wealth.”

What are we to make of this shrewd manager?

Or perhaps more importantly,

what are we to make of Jesus’ response?

Luke is a fun Gospel to preach from

because there are so many off the wall things that are said in it.

It’s also a tough Gospel to preach from for the same reason.

This manager has been dishonest with his boss

and is about to get his just reward.

Before he gets his pink slip, however,

he gives away money that isn’t his

to try and gain some security in his future life,

a doubly dishonest act.

And his boss commends him!?

He still fires him, to be sure,

but he gets a good letter of recommendation on the way out the door!

Why would Jesus tell this story?

It just doesn’t make sense!

As you can probably guess

Christian scholars have been working overtime,

almost since this Gospel was written,

to try and explain away the confusion,

To nice up the story, if you will.

Some say that the manager was only subtracting his commission,

and so his boss doesn’t really lose anything,

While the manager gains the good will of the customers.

But that's not what the story says.

“And his master commended the dishonest manager
because he had acted shrewdly.”

Anyway, if you look closely

the math for this explanation doesn't work either,
unless the manager had different commissions for different customers.

Some other scholars say

that the manager is actually setting the customers up for blackmail
and that when the manager informs the boss of the setup,
That is when he gets his commendation.

I suppose it's a possible explanation,

but that sure is an awfully complex explanation for such a simple story.

Simple story, I hear you say?

Yes, simple story.

Simple if you don't try to read too much into it.

The problem is

the simple story is a story we really don't want to hear.

We don't want to hear it because it is a deeply frightening story.

Have you ever heard of the word mammon?

If we would have read today's Gospel out of the King James Version,
it would have ended, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

The Greek word that was translated as mammon

comes from an old Chaldean word for confidence or wealth personified.

Another possible translation is avarice, or wealth deified.

What an interesting word, mammon.

A rich word.

And a word not often spoken in America.

Not often spoken because mammon is the devil we dance with.

Mammon is the dark side of the American dream.

When the drive for wealth becomes an end in itself,
our relationship with our money has changed.

Money is no longer a tool that serves us;
it has become a god that we serve.

We begin to worship our money,
committing the sin of idolatry;
we serve mammon.

The truly scary thing about mammon is
that it is a risk we face regardless of whether we actually have money or not.
You don't need to have money to idolize it.

One needn't look very far to see that mammon is moving among us.

I find it fascinating
that whenever there is a disaster of some kind
we are always told on the news how much money it is costing us.

Usually we are told how many people were killed or injured as well,
but not always.

The good news is
that disasters of magnitude,
things like Hurricanes, earthquakes, or the tidal waves
have the power to open our eyes to the danger of mammon,
To temporarily free us from our slavery to wealth,
To restore a right and healthy relationship between us and our money.

Do you remember the weeks after the hurricanes hit the Caribbean or the Bahamas,
or the floods that inundated Louisiana last year?

As we were bombarded by images of destruction
and stories of lives turned upside down by the disaster?

As soon as you heard of relief organizations
that were collecting supplies or money
you reached for your checkbook.

Did you worry about what it might cost you?

I know I didn't.

The truth is, as a Christian, that's the way we should be giving all the time.

If there is a need to be met and you have money, you give it.

So what does all this have to do with our shrewd manager?

He wasn't giving away his own money

he was giving away the boss's money,

money that wasn't even his own.

Well, that's not entirely true.

The manager, after all, was still the manager.

He still had legal control over the boss's money,

which is to say that he was legally free

to reduce the debt of his master's creditors.

Normally that kind of activity would cost him his job,

but he was already going to lose his job, so what did he have to lose?

What, indeed!

The real truth of the story,

the hidden truth that we all don't like to hear,

is we are that manager of this parable.

All that we have is given to us by God.

And we are stewards of that bounty,

the managers of those accounts.

And one day there will be an accounting of our management.

The life that we have on this earth is finite.

As much as we ignore and hold at bay this reality,

we will lose that life someday

And we know it.

While we are here on this earth

we are managers of the gifts that we have been given by God.

Our master commends us

to work shrewdly with the gifts that we have been given,
to make friends and build community,
even if we must use dishonest wealth.

It is more important, you see, to make friends than it is to make wealth.

As uncomfortable as this narrative may make us,

there is comfort here as well,
comfort for us as we struggle to make sense
in this world ruled by mammon.

In this story we hear that God can take even our dishonesty

and turn it to good ends,
That God is fully capable of redeeming our sinfulness.

We know this in our minds, if we stop and think about it,

but it is good to remember it in our hearts.

This truth has a way of filling and mending empty and broken hearts,

that little else can match.

As we struggle to make our way in this world

it is good to remember that God loves us and is with us always,
working beside us,

taking our successes as well as our failures
and working out in tranquility the plan of salvation.

Amen.