

The Audit

Proper 20, Year C, RCL. Luke 16:1-13. The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. September 18, 2016. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The parable of the unjust steward is found only in the Gospel of Luke. I sigh whenever it comes up in the lectionary, as it has today, because it is famously difficult to interpret. It can look as if Jesus is recommending dishonesty. But what Jesus is really recommending is that we take our stewardship of material wealth—or in the most general sense, anything we are responsible for—as seriously as any manager would take an audit.

So it's not all about money or oil or wheat. It's about our responsibility to manage everything in creation that falls within our range of activity, including our relationships with one another and with God. But wealth gets our attention. Jesus constructs a story that will draw us in by describing the pickle a dishonest manager is in when the owner of the business shows up and demands an accounting.

In the Gospel of Luke, almsgiving is a key manifestation of humans getting the message that God is generous and therefore we should be too. So we should be good stewards of wealth, and everything else—which from God's point of view means acting generously toward one another, even extravagantly so. The extravagance of the unjust steward's behavior, and his master's approval of it, are what is

important to the moral of the story. The fact that the steward, the debtors he colludes with for his advantage, and the boss himself (who chuckles approvingly over the steward's trickiness) all come off looking like rascals¹ is just part of colorful storytelling. But the point is clearly made that it is God and God's ways that are paramount; wealth is a tool of righteousness in the hands of the righteous, but it makes a poor god.

It is we, then, who are accountable. Our accounts are up for audit—not only at the great cataclysm at the end of the age, but constantly. As in, right now. God knows our proclivities for dealing to our advantage; he knows them right well, in line-by-line detail. And the better we know him, the more satisfying it will be for us to serve not our own selfish advantage but the good of others, one generous act after another.

❖ This is a modest revision of the sermon preached at the Shared Ministry on September 22, 2013.

¹ This insight is from the noted commentator William Barclay.