

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

As you listened to our Gospel a few moments ago, you might be wondering why Jesus seems to be giving praise for dishonesty and shrewdness. But contrary to what you might think about parts of our Gospel this morning, Jesus taught, preached and modeled a consistent message. Jesus' message, both in words and actions, consistently turned the values and the priorities of the world, upside down! Let us talk about this for a few moments.

Three weeks ago Jesus suggested we invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to our dinners, to our banquets. He modeled the same inviting us to his table, to break bread with him, to break the bread that is him.

Two weeks ago Jesus talked about the cost of being his disciple, following him, each one of us picking up his or her cross. He modeled this by enduring the cross for the glory set before him, enduring the cross in our stead.

Last week Jesus modeled again for us as the scribes and the Pharisees said "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." He modeled acceptance because he takes our sins, and we are reconciled with God because Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We realize from last week that Jesus was the shepherd who sought, found and celebrated the return of the lost sheep. He was also the woman who sought, found and celebrated the finding of the lost coin. Jesus tells us that joy is found in heaven when a sheep or coin, that is, a lost sinner, read you and me, is found. And as you have heard from me before, in the understanding of Luke 15, repentance is acceptance of being found.

Not included in our Gospel last week, was the story of the prodigal son who squandered his inheritance and decided to approach his father and ask for help so that he could get back into the good graces of the family. We know that story, how his Father sees him coming and throwing dignity to the winds, runs to him, welcomes him, starts a banquet, a party. The older son, read the Pharisees and Scribes, who should have reconciled the younger son, read you and me, does not do so. Instead God does it himself!

Now, Jesus tells another story to his disciples, but the Pharisees and others are there listening as well, the story is also for them, and for us too.

Picture a steward who squanders his master's possessions, a steward who is about to be fired. Showing shrewdness, forethought in taking care of himself, he cuts the bills of his master's debtors by 50% and 20%, significant percentages. Jesus says the master commends the steward for acting shrewdly, and he tells us that the values of the world are not the values of the disciple, not the values of his disciples. Jesus' disciples stand in contrast to the competitive and alienating ways of the world.

We are to use our wealth our possessions to gain friends for ourselves who will welcome us in heaven. We do not use wealth, we cannot use wealth to buy our way into heaven because Christ has paid that price. But instead we are to help others who are poor in the world and in spirit, to help them bear their burdens, to help others walk Christ's ways as we ourselves are helped. We are to see those in need and to give voice for those who have no voice.

We are to welcome, accept, break bread and be reconciled with others, for our sake and for the sake of the Gospel. We are to have no other God, because as Jesus tells us we can serve only one master, we can love only one God. We are to love God with all heart, soul and might and our neighbors as ourselves, so that we can do unto others as we would have done unto us. The truth of the matter is that where our treasures are, there also we will find our hearts. We cannot serve both God and wealth.

So I wonder, are we as tireless, as energetic about God's economic plan as we are when we talk about taxes, profits and the bottom line? Are we shrewd in working for the welfare of those we do not consider our neighbors, or whom we might not like, or who might not be "our kind of people" or those who might not be as deserving as we are? How about when it comes to doing good for others when we might not get any credit for what we have done? What are we like when it comes to helping those who fail to show their gratitude?

Well here is the crux of it all. We are the people God created. Christ died for each one of us, lovely and unlovely alike, but even the best of us, on our best days, best intentions and all, fail to live by God's plan for creation. Oh, we talk a good fight about being managers of God's creation, but rich as we are, we lose sight of who we are and what we are to be about. Bewitched, bedazzled by the stuff all around us, with the promises of happiness, prosperity, well-being that are held out to us.

And here comes Jesus, his words, his actions, his parables mess up our lives, calling us to a different standard, a higher standard, when it comes to deciding what to do with what we are given. Brothers and sisters, we cannot serve both God and wealth and we cannot be Christ's disciples living as though he has no say in the way we use the riches given us to manage.

For years I prayed a simple prayer, I still do, it goes like this, Lord God, use me, change me, send me. I have found that God, who loves me enough to pay for my forgiveness on a cross, loves me enough to do just what I ask for, he loves me enough to make me uncomfortable.

But here is what counts! We are saved by grace through faith, and someday as we are welcomed into eternity by our friends, Christ will welcome us perhaps even with "Well done good and faithful servant!"

AMEN