

September 19, 2010
Luke 16:1-13
Spend It!

He knew his job – make as much money as legally possible for the firm. He was good at it, and handsomely compensated as well. A savvy player in the politics of money, greed and ambition, he could recognize a threat, rally resources and respond with force that had destroyed rivals and solidified his position. He didn't just survive. He triumphed.

Yet, a person in his position doesn't get there without making a few enemies along the way, and in his dog-eat-dog world, the young pups constantly nipped at his heels. So, it really doesn't matter if the rumors and accusations dogging him now were founded or not. His job was to make money, not squander it. But this old steward still had a few tricks in his arsenal, a brilliant exit strategy.

Before the news spread that he was on his way out, he calls a meeting of the firm's top clients. As he meets with them one-by-one, he tells them that he and the firm understands the challenges its clients face, and that times being as they are, they want to give some sign of appreciation and support. He has arranged to rework their contracts and eliminate some hidden fees and interest, and he is able to save them anywhere from 20 percent to 50 percent. They thank him appropriately. Not long after, word leaks to the press that in these tough economic times, this shrewd steward and his firm have cut their fees 20 to 50 percent. The clients rejoice, and the pr is worth its weight in gold.

The firm's bigwigs go nuts. If they cancel the revised contracts, restore the interest and fees – predatory and barely legal in the first place – they're villains, and if they fire their shrewd manager now, they lose his talent, creativity and more to a rival. His is talent you want on your side. As the one who wrote, negotiated and structured the contracts, he knew how to work the system to make the most for his overbosses. Once again, the shrewd manager proved his worth, and as he did, he shook the system, revealing something new was possible.

The Crisis

This system, our position in it, and the wealth it generates will not and cannot last forever. We can spend our lives living and working as slaves to money, doing any and everything to stockpile it, to guard and defend it, but its going to disappear anyway, eventually. But, if we take Jesus at his word, there's a new kingdom, God's kingdom breaking into this world of ours, turning this one upside down, turning our ideas of right, wrong, honesty and frugality upside down right along with it. A new age is dawning. It's a time for action.

I worked on part of this sermon in a Dunkin' Donuts next to a guy and his insurance agent. The guy signed the contract. Then the two of them began to anxiously complain and fret about what the future held. Who was out to take their money, and how they planned to do it. They grumbled wow they might guard their money and protect it. What was striking was their obvious emotion. They acted threatened, agitated. They cursed a lot, lost in anger, tangled up in fear. I'm not unlike them, but I wonder what it might be like if we weren't so angry or feel so threatened and afraid. What we might do if

we to live and act as the free people God created us and desires us to be, people free to spend our lives, spending money in pursuit of God's righteous justice.

Now, I've been taught to do everything I can to make more money, accumulate more money, and there seems to be a line of smart, shrewd creative people lined up to take my money and make it work for me – to safeguard my future, to guarantee my income, to grow my wealth, build my trust. They're smart men and women, and I won't ask them how they make more money from this money, but I am happy when they do, and very displeased when they don't. I curse then. They're paid to make money, not lose it and certainly not spend it. That's my job as a consumer. In our world, good and wise stewards maximize the income and minimize the ... outcome. After all, who or what else is there in this world to care for me, to put a roof over my head, to guarantee my health if not my money?

But then here's Jesus. He has nothing but the ordinary, everyday things. The basic stuff of life – bread and wine and water and words – that's all. But he gives it away. He spends it. Not on himself, but on us. And his life too. His body, his blood, his mind, his passion. He has that too ... for us. He spends his body, his blood, his life, his glory. He spends it on us. So we can be forgiven. So our burdens can be lifted. So we can be free to live as God's children in God's creation. Being a steward in God's kingdom is different: The mandate is to spend, not accumulate. Jesus calls us, hires us and sets us free to work not for an income, but for an outcome – God's righteous justice, God's kingdom.

The Response

At the end of this story, Jesus gives us a shocking glimpse of life in God's kingdom. It's a place where forgiveness is possible, where burdens are relieved and through the shrewd work of the steward, the lines that divide what's mine from what's yours are erased, a world where rich and poor – perpetual adversaries and rivals -- are brought together to live in God's righteous justice.

God wants shrewd and talented stewards who know how to use their creativity, their innovation, their street smarts and knowledge of the system to effectively squander the master's riches, and bring out of it God's righteous justice – a glimpse, a foretaste.

As Jesus' disciples, as baptized children of God, we've got a new boss and a new job with a new mandate. Here's bread and wine and water and word and body and blood and mind and soul and passion ... and all the resources of this world. Here God has given and gathered more than enough to bring God's forgiveness, life and salvation to a world of people buried in debt, dread and death. The kingdom of God is near. It's time to go ... and Spend It! Spend it all, ...in Jesus' name. Amen.