

I have a problem when I read the newspaper. I can't help but see all these glamorous items that draw my attention: the jewels, the watches, the dresses, the cars. I think to myself, well, if I really want that, I could buy that if I put it on my credit card. Then my eye glances over to the article on the same page: "Venezuelans pick up the pieces of their lives" and then I feel ashamed of myself for even thinking of buying that extravagant item that I don't in the least bit need. People are struggling just to stay alive and I'm looking at fancy cars and bracelets. How selfish. And yet, day after day, articles about horrendous poverty and sickness appear side by side with ads for trips to the Bahamas and Rolex watches. And, after all, there's nothing inherently evil about a BMW or a gold bracelet. What is it that makes me so uncomfortable?

I think it has to do with our Gospel reading. "You cannot serve God and wealth."

We shy away from talking about money in church. **But Jesus doesn't.** In Luke's gospel there are numerous times when money or wealth or possessions are mentioned. Sometimes wealth is denounced, and sometimes wealth-used-for-good is commended. The song of Mary speaks of a reversal in God's kingdom; "*and the rich will be sent away empty.*" (Luke 1:46-55) The sermons of John the Baptist tell us that food and coats must be shared and that tax collectors must be fair. "*Do not extort money from anyone.*" (Luke 3:10-14) In the passage where Luke's Beatitudes are found we read, "*Woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation.*" (Luke 6:20-25)

We'll hear that whole passage on All Saint's Sunday this year. There was the parable we heard a few weeks ago about the rich fool who without thought of others wanted to build bigger and bigger barns for his crops.

Then there are examples in Luke's Gospel of wealth used for good purposes:

And Joanna, ... Susanna, and many others, who provided for [for the disciples] out of their resources. (Luke 8:3)

The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend. (Luke 10:35)

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:34)

Luke does not always present money as an evil thing. What Luke says (as Jesus said) is that money is a dangerous thing. Our property, our savings and our assets have a very strong pull on us because they represent safety, security and unfortunately often, self worth. But money is like fire. Fire necessary to keep us warm and cook our food, but it can burn and destroy us in a second. Our possessions and property are similarly dangerous. They can burn and destroy our souls if we haven't made a right distinction about good and bad ways to use our wealth.

In other words, what we do with our money matters to our soul. Maybe that's why reading the newspaper gives me a twinge. I can see how easy it is to let myself get seduced by the advertising and make a bad decision.

Today and next week we hear parables about money or wealth. Today's parable is, in its own odd way, an example of money used for good, and next week it will be money used for ill.

This parable today about the dishonest manager is really difficult to wrap our minds around.

There are two problems; one is that we may need a different translation of some of the Greek words . Another is that we hear the parable too literally. So, let's tackle the words first.

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. (16:8) This is the core verse which interprets the parable.

The Greek word that we translate dishonest can have a wider range of meanings – such as unrighteous or worldly. The word we translate to be shrewd can also mean sensible, prudent or wise. The children of this age would be the gentiles or those without a Spiritual life. The Children of Light are the followers of Jesus who are Spiritual, but not very practical. Here is a case where the King James Version may be a little easier to understand.

Hear how this verse sounds in the KJV: “And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light..” Instead of our New Revised Standard version of verse 9 here is Heidi’s version: And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of *worldly goods*, so that when they are gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes. In other words, use the ways of the world for good, and then you will be able to live a life in which you can serve God and others.

Finding a better translation of the words is the first part of understanding this parable. But that alone doesn’t make the parable make sense fully. Because the manager who is getting fired because he squandered his master’s property, is doing just that same thing to save myself. And then is commended for it. Would I be thought of as a good person if I said, “Cindi, you owe \$100.00 to the telephone company. Tell you what, Cindi. Why don’t you just pay the telephone company \$50.00.? She might think I was a fine person because now she only has to pay half, and so she might be willing to take me in if I become homeless, but what about the telephone company? I had no right to say that she need only pay \$50! The phone company has now lost \$50 due to my shrewdness.

OK, but what the phone company collects doesn’t really matter to you and me. And we’re taking this all too literally. We aren’t to worry about the details of the parable. What matters is that the prudent steward saw a disaster coming down the pike and he did something about

it. He didn't just sit down and pray about the situation he got up on his feet and did something.

Jesus laments that those who are his disciples, who follow him and hang on every word, aren't very practical. They may be called the children of light, but they don't seem to see the light when it comes to practical matters at hand.

We need to balance our checkbooks as well as pray for God's Kingdom come. We need to take care of our car, or apartment, or home when it needs repairs in order to preserve the asset and not just let it rust or rot away.

It is possible to live in the real world, even in today's world of abundance of worldly goods and temptations, as are found in the newspaper, and still use it to accomplish good things for God and for our neighbors.

The sayings in verses 10 through 13, have been kind of tacked on to the end of the parable, but are not necessarily a further comment on the parable. They are examples of arguing from the lesser to the greater. If you can be trusted with nickels and dimes, then you will be trusted with much greater wealth.

The well known preacher Fred Craddock says, "The realism of these sayings is simply that life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war.... or dine with a queen.... More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, teach a Sunday School Class or go to choir rehearsal. But, whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."ⁱ

In church we need to faithfully attend to all the little matters that keep the doors open and the heat on – paying bills, having a stewardship season (yes, stewardship letters will go out in the mail in the next couple of weeks), and supporting the ECW fundraisers which bring in quiet a

few dollars here and there that add up to thousands to support our church budget. They are a wise and prudent way of keeping the cash flow going for the church so that we can come here Sunday by Sunday for renewal of our Spiritual life: to praise God for our blessings, and receive God's healing grace through the sacraments.

So, although it is true that you cannot serve God and wealth, the words that keep coming back to me – these from the Gospel of Matthew; “Be wise as serpents, and gentle as doves.”

ⁱ Fred Craddock, Interpretation- Luke, John Knox Press, 1990, p. 192.