



September 21, 2025

~ Luke 16:1-13 ~

Rev. Olav Traa

Assistant to the Bishop

Synod of Alberta and the Territories

Luke 16: 1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' 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. And I tell you, make friends for ourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

~

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

My name is Rev Olav Traa. I am an assistant to the Bishop in the Synod of Alberta and the Territories of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

I am speaking with you from the beautiful setting of Camp Kuriakos in Sylvan Lake, Alberta.

I've had several different professions before entering ministry. Most recently, I spent several years in the oil and gas sector, and this experience has shaped my perspective.

The gospel text today begins with an introduction to a business relationship. We are presented with very little information about this enterprise. All we know is that there was a rich man who had a manager accused of wrongdoing.

Instinctively, I wanted to know more. I want to know more about the charges. Were they really slander? Was there evidence? I noticed that the rich man accepted the accusations and demanded an accounting of affairs before firing the manager.

The manager faced a life-altering event. I also observe that the manager did not protest. He simply accepted his fate and tried to find a way to cope with it. It seems that the manager's MIT, or the Most Important Thing, was about what would happen to him and what he could do about it.

He decided to reach out to his network of contacts. The text offers two examples, but there were likely many more. The manager cut deals with them to reduce the debt they owed his rich boss, hoping for favour in the future.

Now, I'm no expert in business practices during Biblical times, but I imagine they are not dissimilar to those we have today. In a nutshell, "Make as much profit as possible."

Some scholars suggest that the rich man might have been abusive toward his debtors by charging predatory interest rates to those unable to pay what they owed. Others suggest that the manager was probably skimming the debts owed for a personal profit. We just don't know. The narrative doesn't expose this level of detail.

Remember how John the Baptizer told the tax collectors not to collect more than what was required, and the soldiers not to extort money or falsely accuse people. (Luke 3:12-14)

Remember when Jesus told the Pharisees to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. (Luke 20:25)

The manager's actions in trying to appease the debtors were to ensure he still had community, that is, people who might still do business with him.

Can we assume that the rich man was a decent and upstanding member of society? Can we assume the manager was a wicked swindler? Neither one was particularly surprised by the outcome, and so then, as it sometimes is today, the truth of that matter was written somewhere between the lines. It's just the way business was done. As the rich man

commended his manager for being shrewd, was he not describing how their economy worked?

During my time in the oil field, I had the opportunity to meet some incredible managers from great companies, managers who held a significant amount of authority. I also met managers from the opposite end of that spectrum.

I was introduced to the ways they conducted business, the methods they use for evaluation, and the processes for granting access to potential contractors. Sometimes, inside information was shared about their operating models, how they assessed progress and the criteria involved in their decision-making process.

I once visited a South American underground mining equipment manufacturer. As I toured their facility, units were being built at different stations. Each station had a chart displaying the build status.

One of the charts displayed a completion rate of 57.12%. I asked the general manager how they could calculate down to such fine detail? He explained that they track everything. Every machine, every part, every bolt that is distributed, every weld and consumable used contributes to the timeline. Everything from receiving and shipping is tracked from the very beginning to the very end. When something goes sideways, this process enables them to respond very quickly.

In my experience, a common procedure in nearly any industry is the use of an RCA (Root Cause Analysis) model. They want to know as quickly as possible, in real terms, what happened to cause an undesirable outcome. One manager explained that it is about figuring out which questions to ask and being open to unexpected answers.

Fast forward to my time as an intern pastor, my supervisor introduced me to the Snook method. This method asks you to identify three things about a text: things you like, things you want to learn more about, and things you don't like. What I didn't like about the gospel text today was in verse 9, when Jesus told his disciples, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Jesus said this and then seemed to contradict himself in the next verse, "For we are called to be faithful, and not to be dishonest." The passage concludes with a confusing if-then-therefore statement, which calls us to be faithful even with dishonest wealth, so that we might one day be entrusted with true riches.

A pivot occurs in this story in verse 8, after the master commends the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly.

Jesus said, "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light."

Seeking the root causes of issues, determining the MIT, and finding the right questions to ask may be what this text is all about.

To figure out whether this particular manager or this particular rich man, to figure out their levels of dishonesty and corruption may not be the point. Celebrating the manager's newfound method of making friends may also not be the point.

Is Jesus really saying, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth?"

In this tract, the Greek word translated as "by" is the word "*ek*". A typical understanding of the word "*ek*" is "out from". But the preposition "*ek*" has a two-layered meaning. Not only "out from," but also "to." Instead of being anchored in where something comes from, it acts as a link to the outcome, to where it leads.

The phrases "Out from" and "to" used together suggest movement and transformation, from one place to another, from one set of values to another, from an economy of greed to an economy of grace.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus exhorts his disciples to go out like sheep into the midst of wolves and be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. (Matthew 10:16)

Perhaps what Jesus is telling us is not to shrink away from the world and live in isolation, but rather, to live in the world and to act in the world.

Perhaps the lesson for us today is not one about figuring out the transactional economies of the world, but rather applying God's economy of grace in our worldly contexts.

We are called to call out injustice and oppression, to care for the sick and bandage the wounded. We can begin by implementing a new RCA, examining our immediate surroundings, in our "here and now." In little things and in big things, we are called to live out the gospels in the real world with our eyes wide open, to get involved, disrupt, and speak truth to powers. That we not shy away from the hard questions, the real questions, but meet them head on, and along the way, be transformed by God's grace.

As this year's Summer Sermon Series comes to a close, with God's help, let us continue to dream big, engage with the world around us, and imagine what Love can be in the world today.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.