

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20c
Amos 8:4-7
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

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This week a whole bunch of members have been hard at work fixing up the lower level of Sodergren Hall to welcome two new non-profit tenants. I want to give a special shout out to our hardworking property committee, Council, and our amazing tenant task force that's been working for months to rent this space in a tough market. Your tasks have ranged from communicating with realtors to reviewing contracts to knocking down walls to cleaning stairwells to fixing paper towel dispensers. You've dedicated your sweat equity and resourcefulness and smarts to create community partnerships and help keep our congregation on firm financial footing. And every person who contributes to our Building Fund has played an active part in this project too. Thank you!

While hanging around the Sodergren basement this week, I've been reflecting on the many ways that space has been used over the years. In the late 1950's it was used for church classrooms, but as needs changed over the decades it's been occupied by a variety of community services such as a daycare center, a counseling center, senior services, transportation providers, at least two different food pantries, and for the last 14 years it was home to Rose Haven day shelter for women and children. I don't even know all the history, but I do know this congregation has stayed committed to using its God-given space to serve the neighborhood. At each transition of tenants, members have used their wits and resourcefulness to further this goal. And all those non-profit tenants have used their own wits and resourcefulness to do the most good and serve the most people with what they had.

The parable Jesus tells today is all about being resourceful and using your wits. It's meant to encourage us, although it might require a little puzzling through.

The dishonest manager, as he's often called, was inventive and resourceful – well, that's a nice way of putting it. He was clever and smart about saving his own skin! It's impossible to ignore the fact that this guy was crooked from start to finish.

This dishonest manager had been cheating his employer for years, cooking the books, lining his pockets, and when his cheating was finally discovered, just before he was fired, he pulled another fast one to save his hide. He did a bit of creative bookkeeping. He shaved off a debt here and a debt there to get in good with the townspeople who could give him his next job. It was good for the manager, but it was also good for his

employer, because those smaller debts were more likely to get paid off. And his crooked bookkeeping made his employer seem generous. It was a very shrewd move. When all was said and done, what could the business owner do but shake his head, and say to the manager: “I gotta hand it to you, that was a nice piece of work. You’re still fired, but it was a nice piece of work!” The owner may have seen a shadow of himself in that shrewd and conniving guy.

Well, what does this parable mean? If you’re confused, you’re in good company. Most people agree this is the most difficult of all Jesus’ parables.

To puzzle it out, it’s good to remember that a parable is never a simple moral lesson. Jesus’s parables are meant to jostle our thinking, to challenge us to see things in a new way. That dishonest manager, he’s nothing new, his way is the way of the world. He’s a Wall Street swindler, he’s a billionaire who pays no taxes. We recognize that guy and want nothing to do with him.

And yet – Jesus intends to jostle us. Jesus declares, “The children of this age are more shrewd in their dealings than the children of light.” Look how that guy used his wits to promote his own self-interest, looking out for #1 — what if we used our wits that well to promote the interests of the One who’s really #1! What would it look like for “children of light” to be just that clever, just that shrewd and just that ingenious – for the sake of God’s kin-dom values of compassion and justice and peace and earth care? What would it look like for us to use our inventiveness to the absolute fullest – not to save our own skin, but to serve God and advocate for others?

Because we are managers, too, like the guy in the parable. We are entrusted with managing a great deal that is not our own, including the money in our wallets, the homes we live in, even the bodies we inhabit and the natural world around us. We are entrusted to care for the things and people in our life in a way that reflects God’s character, and do this in as creative and resourceful and ingenious a way as we can.

And we have an amazingly clever and resourceful God who is our model. God is wise in the ways of the world and clever in using them for good. God is so ingenious that God devised a way to bridge the gap between us by becoming one of us. God came to us in Jesus as a brother, a teacher, someone we could relate to, to love us human beings up-close, experience our struggles, and learn our ways, both constructive and destructive.

But God was more creative yet. Because as God lived deep into our human life, God worked out a way to be connected with us forever. God devised a way to redeem our life from the inside out. God turned the worst display of human destructiveness – crucifixion -- into the most amazing opportunity for God to display a love that reaches

out to you and me and every human being from now until forever. God used the worst in us to give us God's very best.

And if that's not crafty. If that's not inventive. If that's not ingenious in the most loving and enduring way possible, then I don't know what is.

This really is the greatest thing we are entrusted with, as children of light, as managers accountable to God. We're entrusted with this incredible message: *Christ has come near to us, to bring us near to our Creator*. And we are literally surrounded by people who need this good news. People whose hearts are yearning to connect with their Creator, whether they realize it or not, whether they name it this way or not. People longing to know they are loved and cherished and precious to God, and that they have a future. That God can overcome the darkness in them and in the world, and God has a future of life and blessing for everyone.

Some people are open to hearing this message in words: *You are loved. God loves you. You matter. You are of value*. Other people need to experience God's love through caring actions – through people helping each other in practical ways, people listening, sharing, people advocating for justice so everyone can have what they need.

Here is where God's call to inventiveness and ingenuity comes in. Each one of us is given the span of a lifetime to share the beauty of God's love, and put love into practice through our own energy and resources, however we can. And when God takes hold of people's lives, their cleverness and ingenuity get expressed in all kinds of creative ways. We see it happening all the time. Just in this week's news, the stories leap out.

There's the story of Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia, the famous outdoor apparel company. This week we learned that he and his family are giving away their ownership of this company worth \$3 billion dollars. As I understand it, the company will be owned by a non-profit whose role is to give away the money that's earned to organizations that are fighting climate change and preserving undeveloped land around the world. That's about \$100 million dollars each year devoted to saving the planet. Essentially Chouinard is translating his life's work into care for the earth that will continue long after he is gone. That is inventive, ingenious! And it's crafty, in a way that defies all the world's values of profit-seeking and money-worship. (NY Times, 9/14/2022, *Billionaire No More: Patagonia Founder Gives Away the Company*)

Then there are Bill and Melinda Gates, some of the world's biggest philanthropists. They have financial means and their foundation has all kinds of smarts and inventiveness devoted to achieving the United Nations goals of "ending poverty, fighting inequality and stopping climate change by 2030." A lofty goal! In an interview this week, Bill Gates

admitted that the pandemic and war in Ukraine have stalled progress, but he also named specific adjustments and strategies that are being tried globally. It takes ingenuity and inventiveness to keep after such big problems. And it's powerful to remember that Melinda Gates is a committed Roman Catholic, very public about how her faith inspires her inventive sharing. (NY Times, 9/13/22, *Bill Gates: "We're in a Worse Place Than I Expected"*)

Then of course there is MacKenzie Scott, who was married for 25 years to Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon – now divorced. Over the last two years, MacKenzie Scott has given away \$12 billion dollars to mostly small, local organizations that in practical ways communicate good news to people: *You are valued, you matter, you are loved*. She's given windfalls to historically Black colleges and universities, affordable housing groups, refugee assistance, local chapters of Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Boys & Girls Clubs, a mentoring group based here in Portland. Just this week she gave away 2 Beverly Hills mansions worth \$55 million dollars, the proceeds going toward affordable housing. The gifts are usually a surprise, and there are no strings attached. At the same time they are carefully vetted to invest in effective and resourceful groups. I find it breathtaking. Simple but ingenious. There's nobody else doing it this way on this scale. She's giving wealth away just about as fast as she receives it – the opposite of looking out for Number One. (fortune.com, 9/9/2020, *MacKenzie Scott casually gave away a couple of mansions worth \$55 million to charity*)

These are examples on the great world stage, but creativity and ingenuity also happen right at home. How much inventiveness does it take for a single parent to raise a family on a limited income, make rent, keep everybody fed? A heck of a lot of ingenuity. How much resourcefulness does it take to figure out medical bills and insurance (if you are lucky enough to have it) during a medical challenge? Ask anyone who's had a family member in the hospital lately. How much inventiveness does it take for each one of us to keep getting up in the morning, keep living generously, keep tending to the homes and jobs and people God has placed in our care, keep sharing compassion with open minds and hearts? We couldn't do it without the ingenious love of God sustaining us – and inspiring us – to live for more than just ourselves.

God is incredibly creative in finding ways to show love to the human family, so that God's inventive love can be expressed through you and me, today and tomorrow, and every day God gives us breath. Thanks be to God. Amen.