

Wesley United Methodist – September 18, 2016

Text: 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

Title: More than Just Me

There once was a man who was trusted by his employer to handle many responsibilities with very little oversight. He handled almost all of his employer's business dealings, and quite frankly, he did so while making some very good money for himself. The employer discovered that the man he had been trusting had been embezzling from him and for some unknown reason, rather than having him arrested, or immediately removed from the premises, he told his employee to prepare to turn his books over to the boss and get ready to move out of his employer provided housing.

The man was desperate. He didn't know what to do. He knew that he had been cheating his employer and his dismissal would certainly be more than justified, but how was he going to live? He had no other job skills, and who would take him on when it became known that he had been embezzling from his employer. In desperation, he came up with a plan – a plan to take care of himself – because, of course, in his mind, he was the only one who mattered.

Before it became known that he now longer had any authority but before he turned his office and records over to his boss he called in those who owed money to his boss. "How much do you owe? \$100,000 – now it is only \$75,000." "How much to you owe? \$50,000 – now it is only \$25,000." It is unknown whether this new amount might have been what they really owed the boss and the extra, if you will, was what he was skimming off the top for himself.

Those whose debt was reduced were quite likely to think well of the one to whom they owed the debt. This dishonest employee had generated some good will for his boss.

What about his boss? He is now stuck with a very awkward situation. If he goes back to the debtors and increases the debt to the original amount, they are certainly going to be very angry at him. If he carries through with his plans to fire his dishonest employee, the community will think badly of him. How could he get rid of such a generous person who had just reduced their debt? In this situation, those whose debt had been reduced would most likely feel obligated and maybe even greatly desirous of helping the person who had just reduced their debt by such a large amount.

Somehow you just have to admire his ingenuity. His morality is terrible. He has been stealing, and he continues to steal and manipulate. His thought is only for himself, but he knows what he wants and he goes after it using every ounce of creativity that he could muster. He manipulates things to make them work for him – because, again, it is all about him – and only him.

When Jesus tells this story to the crowd gathered around him, and to the Pharisees and Scribes who are present they, and we, are shocked to hear Jesus say that the boss “commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.”

Say, what? How can this be? Certainly Jesus is not commending this man’s behavior! Jesus can’t possibly be praising his dishonesty. No, he isn’t. But Jesus is recognizing and pointing out that this man, who knew what he wanted, went after it and used every resource available to him to get it. He was driven by a powerful vision – he would be out of work.

He would have no way to earn a living. He would not be hired as a manager by someone else, and in desperation he laments, that he is not strong enough to earn a living by hard physical labor, and he is too ashamed to be seen begging. He knew what he had to do and he did it.

Jesus, in praising his ingenuity, says it is because people in the world are more shrewd and wise in taking care of themselves than those who follow God are in living a life pleasing to God.

Eugene Peterson, in his contemporary translation of the Bible, puts it this way, "Now here's a surprise: `The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way – but for what is right – using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

I called today's sermon "More than just me" because I wanted to take us in the direction that I think Jesus was trying to take those who were listening to him. It is not about just us – either individually or collectively.

Jesus goes on to say that if we are honest in small things, we will be honest in big things. If we can be trusted with small jobs we can be trusted with big jobs. We cannot serve two masters, we cannot serve both God and money.

Serving God means that we are focused beyond just ourselves. Yes, I do believe we need to be responsible and to take care of ourselves and those for whom we have responsibility. I do believe that God wants us to do that, but I believe that even doing that, is a response to the question,

“What does God want me to be and do?” The manager didn’t understand this, he thought it was about just him and everything he did was focused on taking care of himself. Our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy begins with the reminder that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone” not just for ourselves.

Over the next few weeks, we will be focusing on why we are a Body together being the hands and feet of Christ in a frightened and hurting world. We will be focusing on getting and being “Outside our own little world.” We will focus not just on maintaining, ourselves, or “the church” but why it is that the church exists at all. We will reaffirm our purpose in this world and who we are together.

I want to begin that by sharing at least a part of a story with you, one that has had a profound effect on me and helped to remind me of the purpose of being the hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world. This is a true story, and if any of the details are inaccurate it is only because of my faulty memory.

I’m going to jump into it a little after the beginning. It came to our attention that there was a 12-year-old girl named Safiatu living in Sierra Leone who was desperately in need of heart surgery if she was going to live. I may fill in more of the blanks at a later time, but I want to start with Sammy. Sammy was a 12-year-old girl in the church I was serving. Sammy went home from church that day, greatly disturbed.

With the innocence and sense of justice that was part of her life, she went to her mother and said, “It is not fair. If she lived here, she would have already had the surgery and would be out playing with her friends. What are we going to do about this?”

Her mother, Lisa, was an amazing woman who listened carefully to her children and took very seriously their thoughts and the faith that was growing within them. She called me that night and told me what Sammy had said and that she was going to begin making phone calls and exploring options.

Lisa and her husband used every ounce of their street smarts to explore options and check out agencies, to make phone calls, write letters, visit individuals. It was not long before their energy, enthusiasm, passion, and vision had spread beyond their family and started to infect the church. Not having any idea of what was involved, actions started to take place. Dinners were held to raise money. Sammy and her friends at school made and sold hearts at Valentine's Day. The ball had started rolling and there was no stopping it.

One of the amazing pieces for me was that in the process of communicating with her family and the clinic where she had been identified, we learned that Safiatu and her family raised goats. Sammy and her family also raised goats as did at least one other family in the church. In the other family was an 8-year-old boy named Holden. Holden also wanted to do something to help. Holden loved to ride his bike and decided he could use that as a way to raise money. He went out and solicited pledges asking people to help save the life of a 12-year-old child. On a cold day, Holden rode multiple laps of a bike path with his mother riding beside him for safety and support. That 8-year-old boy raised \$1800 by riding his bicycle.

As the pastor, I watched all of this in amazement as a congregation came together to try to save the life of a child they had never met who lived half way around the world, outside of our little world. This is the child I

mentioned last week, who wanted to know why people she didn't know would be trying to raise money and arrange for surgery for someone they didn't know. When told that we were Christians and it was what Jesus wanted us to do, she said, "That's why I want to know this Jesus."

There is a lot more to this story and you will hear more of it at another time, but for now let me say, that a 12-year-old was passionate about more than just herself. Her mother was persistent and ingenious in pursuing every avenue she could find, doing what Peterson describes, being smart in the way of being alert, exploring all the angles, using her wits for what was right. Because they were concerned about more than just themselves – Safiatu, a Muslim child living in Sierra Leone, finally had surgery at a hospital in Tel Aviv. The surgery was performed by Jewish doctors and paid for by Christians in the United States. Safiatu's story helped us get outside of our own little world in a profound and life changing way.

It is amazing what can happen when we take the same kind of passion the manager used for survival and apply it to doing the work of God.

The Shrewd manager used his resources to take care of himself. Sammy believed that there was enough for "more than just herself" and proved that by pooling our resources of time, energy, creativity, ingenuity, money, passion and whatever else you can think of we could do something truly amazing.

I tell this story not to glorify Sammy, or anyone else, but as an illustration and to help us ask the question for us. How can we use those same resources to take care of God's world? How can we expand our resources to support a better world for all people, locally and globally?

We are doing some of that with our collection of school supplies for Liberia, and our collection of back packs and sleeping bags for homeless persons in Boston. We do that through our weekly offerings when we bring back to God a portion of what God has given to us, and we celebrate that together we can do far more than any of us can do on our own. The United Methodist giving structure ensures that our generosity blesses as many people as possible in sustainable strategic ways.

We are raising up the next generation to lead the church and to lead society by developing the gifts of undergraduate and graduate students in the United States and around the world. Over the last few years, we have raised almost \$69 million dollars to help eliminate the threat of death from Malaria. Here in New England, we have raised over 1.2 million dollars to save lives around the world.

In this parable, Jesus reminds us that when we are honest in small things, we will also be honest in big things, and that if we are honest in small jobs we will also be given larger jobs to do.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that we cannot serve two bosses. We will either adore the first and despise the second or vice versa. We cannot serve both God and money. This is true. This is not a question of whether or not people should have money. We know that many very wealthy people serve God very faithfully. The issue is not about making money, or having money, it is about how our decisions are made. It is about who owns what.

Regardless of whether we think we have a lot of resources or only a few, the question for each of us, is do we own our wealth or do they own us. Do we own them so that with God we can make decisions about how to use them in the best way to serve God by taking care of our families, our

world, and those whom God loves? Or do our possessions own us so that all of our decisions and actions are based on holding on to what we have?

The dishonest manager knew how to use what he had to serve a larger goal – his self-preservation. How much more than must we the children of God, understand the riches that have been entrusted to us so that we can use them to serve God. Let me also, say that one of the riches that we had, was Sammy. We adults all felt badly about Safiatu, but we didn't know what to do and in our adult way didn't immediately imagine any real way that we could make a difference. Sammy, as a child, saw things differently, and challenged us to make a difference. It was Sammy who awakened us to what the amazing opportunity that God had placed before us.

Let us be open to the ways that God places opportunities and challenges before us, so that we can be shrewd and ingenious for God.