

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
September 22, 2019 Proper 20C  
Text: Unjust Steward  
Theme: Spiritual Thriving

Sometimes the bible is confusing. I'm guessing that more than a few of you will agree? Some biblical stories are so difficult to understand and take so long to explain that it is hard to actually get around to proclaiming the Good News. Today's passage is one of those stories, it's the kind of story that inspired Martin Luther to say, "Sometimes you have to squeeze the Biblical text until it leaks the Gospel."

So, let the squeezing begin and let us hope to get to the Good News on this joyful day that is about celebrating something beautiful for God in honor of a beautiful woman of God as we bless and dedicate the Cecil B. Fish Courtyard that has been more than 3 years in the making.

Luke's Gospel tells of a dishonest manager who has been caught in the act of embezzling. After some self-assessment, he realizes how deep his trouble is. He is too lazy to work physically and he is too proud to beg so he has to do something to save himself.

He does not just wait to be fired, as people in crisis often are, he becomes creative. The scoundrel visits all of his master's vendors with outstanding bills. "How much do you owe my master? A thousand? Let me drop a zero so it's only a hundred. To another: "Four million! Well it appears that, thanks to my efforts, you owe only 1 million. Huge sums are written off and in so doing the manager is both currying favor and implicating all the creditors in his scheme.

The dishonest manager's scheme is complex. The creditors are called in one by one. There are no group conversations and they have every reason to be quiet about the amazing reductions they receive not knowing that others are benefitting as well. Each one is asked to state what they owe and then they must alter their bill in their own hand. This is really collusion to defraud the rich man and they become full-blown accomplices themselves. The manager has taught them how to cook the books and now the rich man has a claim against them all. (John Shea).

Who said the bible wasn't interesting? This story sounds like it could have been ripped right out of headlines of latest political or financial scandal. The next day, the

manager presents the ledger to the landowner. He can see where the totals have been scratched through, erased, and rewritten. It's outrageous.

And just when we think the dishonest jerk is going to get his comeuppance, Jesus—the morally incorruptible, ethical exemplar—does something that nobody expects: He praises the corrupt manager!

In Jesus' story the landowner says, "You business genius, you! I wish all the priggish sons-o-light in this company showed as much initiative and commercial creativity! You are one shrewd operator! I'm moving you up to the front office!"

Wait, what kind of a story is this? Are we supposed to tell this story around young people? What is Jesus doing?

So, is that it? Is the point here that Jesus wants us to be deceitful? Are we called to cheat others when our own neck is on the line? Maybe Jesus is a bit edgier than most of us realized?

Hopefully, we can all agree that Jesus doesn't want us to save ourselves by deceiving and cheating others. So why does Jesus praise the dishonest manager?

The rich man calls the manager shrewd or in the Greek, wise. Biblical wisdom is associated with practical action. The wise are those who know how to survive. Remember the story of the wise man who built his house upon the rock and it withstood the rain, the storms, wind, floods and stood firm. The wise know how to survive.

And here is where we must take an interesting turn to try to make sense out of Jesus' hilariously offensive and wild story. Stories that focus on physical and social survival as this story does, (I'm too weak to dig and too proud to beg), are meant to be applied to our own spiritual lives.

So, what are the spiritual dynamics at work here? People come to church to experience spiritual growth. We want to learn how to survive spiritually in this mind numbing and stuff crazy world. We want to find a way to be spiritually alive in the culture of death that surrounds us?

The dishonest steward knew that his physical and social well-being were imperiled and he took decisive action to survive. For this he was called shrewd or wise.

If we are to learn from the shrewd steward, we also must take decisive action to nurture and protect our spiritual life.

The question from this story is something like, **“How decisively do we act to protect and ensure our own spiritual life together?”**

The truth is that we are like the shrewd manager, when our physical or social well-being is threatened, we spring into action. When the doctor tells us that we need to start exercising or risk an early death by heart attack we make diet and exercise changes. When our work life is imperiled, we look for friends, allies and training to help us get better and become more productive.

But what do we do when our spiritual life - our deep connectedness to God is threatened or our beloved community of worship, or we are knocked off our spiritual center? This was a real question for the community of St. Mark's 10 years ago. This beloved place was in peril as only a handful of worshipers remained. It was a real question for Cecil Fish who had spent more than 50 years of her life dedicated to this faith community.

What do you do when something that you both love and need is threatened? What do you do to keep nurturing your spiritual life? Well Cecil along with a few others did not want to see a for sale sign in the Fish Garden just behind this altar. So, they rolled up their sleeves and began to re-gather a community. They did not give up or give into despair, they decided to Build something beautiful for God in this Neighborhood once again.

What shrewd and creative action did they do to rebuild a community? Well I'm sure that I don't know the half of it but there are still people at St. Mark's that can tell you how they began to rebuild a struggling congregation. I think that some of the things they did were these.

They loved one another. They really cared for each other as a community centered on the Love of Christ is supposed to do.

They got on the phone and invited people back to church. They took people out to lunch and told them about the rebirth of St. Mark's and that they were needed for the rebuilding of a faith community.

They cooked meals for those who were ill or had loved one's in the hospital. I don't know but I hope they delivered casseroles to anyone who was going through a

struggle – one shouldn't just get a casserole for cancer or a funeral, what about casseroles for lost jobs or broken marriages or the travails of parenting surly teenagers or any experience of crisis. The rules of casseroles need to be expanded. I say casseroles for all. The church freezer should be stuffed full and it should be someone's delight to slip them onto porches and shove them through mail slots and ring the door bell and run away laughing. But I digress.

They decided that everyone was welcome in church especially children. They delighted in the sounds of children crying or fussing or kids being too loud at the back of the church. They decided not to give parents the stink-eye but to give them the love-eye because the sound of youngsters and the energy of children is part of what it means to be church, part of what it means to build something beautiful for God together, part of what it means to have a future together.

They were shrewd and creative. They opened up their building to outside groups of all kinds, some of which they were not exactly sure they agreed with. They let their building become a place for the community to gather, to learn, to grow, to heal and care for one another.

They were shrewd and creative and risky. They spent a bunch of money they barely had to build a Montessori school to nurture the lives of children and families. It was such a bold move the treasurer quit in protest. It was a wild and shrewd manager kind of thing to do, to say we want to serve kids and families and be part of that human thriving even if it costs us.

They were wildly generous and raised \$40,000 one morning at church to pay for a new roof that was leaking into the organ pipes. Then they did one better they raised over \$100,000 in investment money to install a large solar system, 138 solar panels on the roof that you cannot see, to make this church greener and more eco-friendly than it had been. It was a wild and crazy move.

They were shrewd and unusual in that they dedicated themselves to making something Beautiful for God in this Neighborhood and they didn't wait around expecting someone else to come and save them. They stepped up and did it. They made church together. They got involved and volunteered and worked. They were not passive consumers of church or spiritual refreshment, they were the makers of worship and the doers that created parties and vigils and potlucks and small groups and bible studies and children's programs and the best coffee hour in the city.

The things in life that we really desire cannot be purchased, they must be lovingly made by our acts of loving kindness and dedication to one another. Community, real Christian community, the kind that Cecil helped to create, takes energy, loving kindness, inconvenience, and shrewdness.

Well I think you get the point. Our spiritual life is really work, our creative and shrewd efforts. Every one of us needs a place of deep relationships, moving worship, demanding study, hilarious fun, moving beauty, nurturing love, ready forgiveness, and challenging growth.

I think this parable is a strong invitation for us to take stock of what we are willing to do to be a part of a thriving spiritual community. What are we willing to give of ourselves to ensure that not only are we growing spiritually but that we are investing in the spiritual growth of others? What shrewdness, what belated creativity, what wild generosity is stirring in your soul this day?

Today we celebrate a beautiful saint of the church in Cecil Fish whose loving labor over many years helped to make sure we would be here as a community today. Today we celebrate the renewal and rebirth of a faith community, the tree of life mosaic on the wall of Cecil's Courtyard is, as one member told me, "a fitting symbol for the resurrection of St. Mark's and the beauty and life that it contains." But today is also a call to action, and invitation to step up and be part of making something beautiful for God in this place, to take risks to lead, to be part of the ministries that make this community work each week. **Cecil was never a passive recipient of church.** The day she fell on her afternoon walk at La Vida Llena, she had served in the sacristy that morning, getting things ready for the weekday Eucharist. In her 90's she was still volunteering at the front desk answering phones and welcoming people who came through our doors with that wonderful and beguiling smile. You are not called to be a passive recipient of church you are called to risk participation even if you don't want to. You are free to be a little uncomfortable. You are free to share the work and joy that make community.

Cecil was a shrewd manager, a wise rebuildler of a community, a sagacious advisor, a loving friend, a hard-working member. She reminds us of what it takes to build a healthy lively faith community. She showed us the way to Build something beautiful for God in this place.

What remains is for us to take our place in that long chain of being and doing and loving and giving that makes community. Each of us, no exceptions, are called to be shrewd and creative makers of community. Each of us are called to demonstrate the

love of Christ to those around us in the most shrewd and creative of ways. The adventure awaits each of us. It is my hope and I think it would have been Cecil's as well, that you give generously of yourself and your resources to make something beautiful for God in this place. She did and we are here because of her shrewd choices and her wild love of God. May it be so among us.