

September 21, 2025

Rev. Mike Eller

“Relational Currency of God’s Economics”

Luke 16:1-13

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells perhaps his most puzzling parable. It’s enough to keep scholars still scratching their heads today. The story goes that a manager is about to be fired for mismanagement of his boss’s possessions, essentially cooking the books. This manager is the middle man between the demanding interests of a wealthy boss and the needy clients who now owe him money. After the charges were brought against him, the manager schemes for his next move—seeing that he has no future in any work that would require real strength but also too prideful to beg for money. Weak in body and spirit, but not weak in intellect.

So he calls in each debtor, and one by one reduces what they owe the boss by a considerable margin: A hundred jugs of olive oil is reduced to fifty. A hundred containers of wheat is cut down to eighty, and so on. He does each a favor so that when he’s dismissed from the job, he will have at least made some friends and they might welcome him into their homes. Now, normally a demanding boss would be irate for this sort of willful mismanagement of his resources, yet the master is impressed. He commends the manager for his shrewdness, his crafty dishonesty. He says: “The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” This is to say: those who have worldly interests invest a considerable amount of resources, planning, forethought, and scheming in order to play the game—to accumulate the wealth and possessions they are after, earth-bound possessions that have no eternal value.

But those called here “children of light”, eternity-minded people, hardly show the same level of intentionality and scheming, even though they are after things of eternal value. I think Jesus is saying, we as the church, can often be too casual when it comes to amassing great wealth in God’s economy. I say “the church” because in the wider context in which this parable is situated, we know that the Pharisees are listening in on Jesus. These were

the religious elites, yet they also loved money, and were masters at getting more of it.

It is the battle of two economies and Jesus saw how the systems of this world run counter to the economy of God. In God's economy, the currency is relational. It is not *stuff* that we're after. The stuff is there to serve a people-purpose: the striving to draw the circle wide, inclusion, making friends, keeping people connected, investing in the flourishing of people. Yet, we as the church, often pursue this using our leftovers. That is, we give all our energies and ingenuity toward accumulating possessions in the economy of the world, yet when it comes to securing treasures of eternal value, we have little left to give. No room left on the calendar. No room left in our wallets. Energy tanks depleted to be of any real use in God's economy.

It's the dishonesty and rule-breaking part of what the manager does here that most interpreters get hung up on. Yet, I believe Jesus avoids making this parable about morality because he isn't praising the dishonesty in its own right, but the initiative, the imagination, the courage to use what one has as leverage not for self alone but for the pursuit of relational currency.

Yesterday, I represented our church at the Leonia International Day of Peace. It was a wonderful time, and a beautiful day, on the lawn of the United Methodist Church. This event brought leaders and artists from different humanitarian organizations and religious institutions, representing different faith traditions and denominations. I was grateful to be asked to offer a prayer during the service.

Just before I got up to pray, Imam Charaf, from the El-Zahra Islamic Center, spoke about our need to find a commonality in the work of peace. He talked about how country leaders are out there with their greatest minds working to master the art of war and violence. These leaders are scheming to make the systems of our world work like a machine. They are working to perfect how to disappear the immigrant, to keep the marginalized in their place and out of the way. These are tirelessly scheming for ways to protect white privilege and the power and position of the elites.

He asked, Where are our religious leaders working just as hard to master the art of peacemaking and love? Where are those willing to put in just as much time and energy to ensure the work of peacemaking is accomplished in our world.

It was acknowledged multiple times during the event what a daunting task that seems at times. That it must be the daily, even small, diligent work of those willing to put in the time and energy.

I think somewhere along the way we came to believe that being “a child of the light” is a passive job. It’s what we do on the weekends. It’s our religion that we occasionally practice, when it’s convenient. Do we pursue the values of God’s economy with the same vigor and fortitude as those who oppose those same values?

Jesus preached quite a bit against money. In the end, he concludes this parable saying: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” There is something about these two economies that run in opposition to one another. Jesus knew that if you let the lure of money and possessions infect you, you will be unable to see the other as your sister, brother, neighbor, or friend. They may instead be merely a commodity.

Today’s parable is often titled the Unjust or Dishonest Manager. I like how theologian and author Brian McLaren titles it, *The Steward Who Switched Sides*. One day he is stewarding the system of this world until he sees that it no longer serves him in the same way. And he switches sides and begins using that same ingenuity that once kept the system going to invest in people instead.

I was thinking this week about that shiny, golden ring in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. If you haven’t watched the movies: There’s a ring that holds immense power. Lord Sauron is trying to get ahold of it so that when he puts the ring on he can reach a pinnacle of evil powers yet unknown even to him. But the ring doesn’t just attract the evil-minded. Little Frodo Baggins of the Shire comes to find the ring one day and sets out on a quest to destroy it at Mount Doom. Yet from time to time, even he is tempted to put the ring on and experience some of its powers, yet at the cost of extreme physical and mental drain. It’s like the ring begins to corrode a person’s soul and take over their personhood.

I wonder, What are you and I being seduced by? What is it for us that glitzes and glimmers, that shiny, golden thing, that pulls at our personhood and perhaps begins to corrode our soul by its lure even when we try it on for a moment?

Speaking further on this parable, Brian McLaren remarks: “the American church in nearly all its forms has thrived for 400 years because it made a

deal: it told people, 'you CAN love both God and money.' " What will it take to make sure we stay on the side of being true stewards in God's economy?

How will we invest ourselves anew—with all of our intellect, wisdom, craftiness, and ingenuity—to ensure the work of love, justice, and peacemaking are being accomplished... in your homes, in our church, in our communities? The Gospel will always be on the side of relationships. Jesus says, spend yourselves in that economy. It will reap an eternal reward. Amen.