

Defining “Shrewd” – Luke 16:1-13

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Picture this: You and your spouse are sitting in the family room when your two children, ages 11 and 13, walk in. “We’ve got a question,” the younger one announces. “We think you two are worth about 800 grand. Is that true?”

This question smacks you right in the face for a couple of reasons. First, you’ve never talked to your children about your financial position. And second, this “800 grand” that your daughter just mentioned is remarkably close to your *actual* net worth. So you sit there with your mind racing to comprehend where this conversation originated.

You take a deep breath to steady yourself and to buy time to consider how to answer, and finally you stammer out, accusingly, “Just who says we are worth that kind of money?”

“Nobody told us,” the daughter responds. “We used Google and looked it up on the Internet.”

That’s when you again are reminded that you’re not living in your grandmother’s world.

While this conversation is an imaginary one, the technology it mentions is not. In fact, finding someone’s financial worth on the Internet is increasingly possible because you no longer have to be a member of Forbes 400 or Fortune 500 to show up in databases. If you have stock options, a high salary or significant business sales, there’s a good chance that at least some of that data is available

online. And some kids have discovered that they can find those reports.

The progeny of some executive parents are sifting through the filings of the Securities and Exchange Commission to locate the info. Others are using real estate Web sites like Zillow.com to calculate the value of the family home and vacation homes. Still others are scanning lists of donors to find out how much their parents are giving away, so as to estimate how much they have. And even if the kids can't find a specific mention of their parents, they can still look up average salaries in the professions of their parents and make an educated guess.

As you can imagine, this knowledge in the hands of savvy offspring is changing the dynamic of families. The Internet is making it possible for them to become smooth operators way before they cut their adult teeth.

He or she may not show as much shrewdness and determination when doing homework or chores around the house, but this kind of work does demonstrate what they can do when they put their minds to it.

The parable of the dishonest steward here in Luke 16 is one that is difficult to interpret. It doesn't get preached on very often because it's difficult to figure out what Jesus is getting at by telling it.

In the story, the manager hasn't managed the wealth of the rich man well. He's become negligent as he's lived off the commission he has received for his role as manager. Still, the master gives credit to the manager for his initiative and shrewdness in making things right with the master's debtors.

In negotiating down the amounts that the debtors owe the master, the manager tries to make amends with the master for his poor performance, and he tries to make new friends with those who owe the master money.

Nobody prompts him to do this — the initiative is all his own. And he does so with a shrewdness Jesus seems to embrace.

“The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generations than are the children of light,” Jesus says.

Despite the fact that the manager inappropriately managed the master’s money and tried to make amends by negotiating with the debtors, he was shrewd in pulling off what he did. And Jesus commends him for it.

And people of faith, according to Jesus, could stand to demonstrate as much shrewdness as the rest of the world does.

He’s lifting it up the ability and willingness to be shrewd as important in our journeys of discipleship.

The manager in our story, when times were tough, didn’t wait around for someone to tell him what to do. He knew he wasn’t strong enough for physical labor, and he had too much pride to beg for assistance. So, he took action to improve his lot. He shrewdly created new relationships and found a financial way forward by re-negotiating the debts the debtors owed.

In the face of challenge, he didn’t curl up in the fetal position and cry. He didn’t blame somebody else for his mistakes. He didn’t wait for somebody to direct him. No, he stepped up and creatively found a new solution. He

operated in a world full of scoundrels and dishonesty. And his master rewarded him for it.

Christ says, for the sake of the kingdom of God, go and do likewise. Be willing to go to all lengths, to use even resources generated in an unjust system, to help those who truly need it.

Too often, we think of the word “shrewd” as one involving dishonest intentions. And even the main character in this parable is described as the “dishonest manager.”

And yet, while called to be people set apart from the world in how we live—to be honest and noble, we are people of this world—living amid the systems of the culture that produces wealth often by dishonest means.

Do something good with it, Jesus tells us. “If you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth,” he asks, “who will entrust to you the true riches?”

And being faithful with dishonest wealth involves being shrewd, or crafty, in ways in which good can come from it.

Maybe the best example of turning bad into good is when, through the legal process of asset forfeiture, law enforcement seizes money and property acquired through illegal drug activities and then federal and state agencies repurpose these forfeited assets for various community programs, like drug education and prevention initiatives. In other words, being shrewd in doing something good with funds generated through nefarious purposes.

Most of us aren’t going to encounter wealth that has come directly through dishonest practices, though. But we

all can exhibit shrewdness in how it is we use the resources available to us to benefit those in need.

Several years ago, our own Betty Nichols shrewdly saw the opportunity to use people's love for flowers and plants and turn it into a benefit for the Shepherd of Hope Food Pantry. Now, the Posies for the Pantry event every spring raises thousands of dollars to feed the hungry in our community.

And on a much, much bigger scale, we hear of millionaires and billionaires around the world who are designating large portions of their fortunes to help populations in need. They do it smartly—they think through creatively how their money can do the best good for the longest period of time.

That's being shrewd, crafty, or wise with what we have.

The kingdom of God, and specifically our congregation here, needs our initiative and our shrewdness so that the Good News of the Gospel can be heard inside and outside of our walls.

Horizon 2035 is a readiness plan adopted by the Session this year to help us realize our preferred future, which is a thriving congregation well into the next decade identified by greater opportunities for people of all ages to grow in their love for God (faith development) and love for neighbor (deepening relationships).

And realizing this vision is going to mandate a good amount of shrewdness, capitalizing on the resources we have and using them in creative and crafty ways: New opportunities for service, new programs for deeper faith development, new staff to help with these additions, further

enhancements to the facility — all for the purpose of allowing for our community to flourish. This is both for all of us who are here and for those who are not here yet.

It's taking the resources we're exposed to, the resources of the world, and using them for the glory of God. And that requires us getting a little shrewder.

We shouldn't employ dishonest tactics (we can't trust that Jesus would recommend it, no matter his language in this parable). But we should be wise and crafty enough to use what's at our disposal to further express our love for God and for others.

In so many ways, we are all initiating and shrewd — in our relationship building, in our careers, in our personal quests to get ahead. Why not in the church?

Jesus concludes this text by saying, "You cannot serve both God and wealth." Being shrewd is using the wealth we find (money, time, and talent) to serve God.

Those two kids in that imaginary story who did some estimating of their parents' net worth are worthy of our admiration. They used their initiative and their brainpower to arrive at some conclusions — conclusions that weren't too far from reality.

Being a disciple and a community of disciples requires no less cleverness.