

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Seminarian Sarah Voorhees

Sunday, September 19, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113
1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Good morning. My name again is Sarah Voorhees. Let me begin by telling you a little about myself. It seems that in order to preach an effective sermon, the listeners need to know a little bit about the person who is doing the talking. I was surprised when I was asked to preach for your Seminarian Sunday. After all many of you know Jim Dunlop, who is here this morning. Jim is a member of my class and a member of this church, and he seemed like the obvious choice. But as it turned out their decision as to who would preach today was based solely on good looks and charm. So, I won. However if they had based it just on “coolness” he would have won hands down.

In all seriousness, I am a senior student at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, working on my Master of Divinity Degree, with high hopes of graduating in May and receiving my first call shortly thereafter. If you think I look familiar, it may be because I researched Trinity, for my class on stewardship and evangelism, during my second year of seminary. I spent a few weeks interviewing people and sitting in on Sunday services and various activities. During that research time I came to have a sincere affection for the people here and the sense of community that is felt and I am delighted to be here as your guest preacher today.

Dr. Kobb is the preacher for your traditional worship services and he is our Associate Dean for Vocation and Life-long Learning. But after a number of typos in his mail that came to him we have come to know him as the Dean for Vacations and Life-long Learning. So if you have a need to address him, maybe you should give him his proper title—Vacations and Life-long Learning.

I am original from Partridge, Illinois where my parents still live. I spent a few years working in Iowa and Nebraska and after my first two years at Gettysburg, returned to Nebraska for my internship last year. During that time I used to kid my supervisor how he gave me all the tough texts for preaching. He got all the old favorites like Christmas and Easter, and I got theological mysteries like Pentecost and the Transfiguration. I thought those days were behind me until I was asked to preach here and read today’s gospel lesson.

Today we read the parable of the shrewd manager. What is interesting about this story is that it is sandwiched in between two other stories—the prodigal son and the rich man and Lazarus. These are preaching classics. You get to teach all kinds of good stuff about love and forgiveness, but I didn’t get those texts. I got the shrewd manager. No problem! Not to mention the fact that I am here to make sure you know that the seminary you support is doing a good job of educating the pastors of tomorrow. No pressure whatsoever.

Something else that I was notorious for in Omaha was the use of what I used to call audience participation sermons. Now this is nothing to be nervous about, but know that part

of the joy of having a seminarian in your pulpit is enjoying the learning process in a new and different way. So, here is a little survey to start things off this morning. How many people here have ever done something nice for somebody else ever? Held a door open for someone, paid someone a compliment, even just said "God bless you" when someone sneezed. Have a quick show of hands. How many people have ever done anything nice? O.K., upon looking around I see that most of your hands are up. If your hand is not up, you need to think about that.

This next question you might not want to raise your hand for, but we are in church, it is group confession time, so "how many have ever done something nice for the wrong reason?" For example, "Honey you look great in that color!" We have all done it at one time or another. Slightly tweaked the truth to protect the feelings of a loved one, or another example of doing something nice for the wrong reason might be complimenting your boss's spouse. Just so maybe you might get a good word outside of the office. So a quick show of hands if you can think of a time when you have done something nice for the wrong reason. O.K., O.K. So we are all in this together.

A friend of mine calls this being a weasel. We are all "weasilly" from one time to another, whether or not we like to admit it, although we all sort of admitted it here together today. So all of us who just raised our hands have just a little bit of an insight into today's gospel lesson. Now all kidding about this text aside, this story is a little challenging to understand at first glance. Jesus tells a complimented tale about a servant who is a bit of a weasel. Upon hearing that he is about to be sacked from his job, he decides to get crafty and so he goes to all these business patrons and reduces their debt to him by half. Now imagine this in today's society. Let's say this guy is in marketing. The boss finds out that an employee's work ethic is less than stellar and so tells him that he has until the end of the day to clean out his desk and hit the road. So what does the guy do? He knows that he is not trained in anything else besides marketing, so he decides that he is going to have to start a marketing business of his own and he calls up all the clients in his Rolodex. "Hi Bob. It's Joe. Boy, do I ever have a deal for you! You know how you owe the company 20 grand for that last account? Well, it is your lucky day buddy. We had a little paper work mix-up and your bill is actually 10 grand. I just faxed you your new bill. Oh, listen. Today is my last day. Let me give you my new number, so that we can stay in touch." The parable of the shrewd manager is timeless, because throughout history, there have always been weasels.

What we learned from this story though, comes from understanding that Jesus wanted to shock his audience. He did it a lot. He used language that was intended to push people's buttons a little bit. The gospel writer, Luke, sends a clear message over and over again in what he writes. He is constantly giving the message in this parable that money is always negative. Now, before you hear that sentence and think that is the end of the story, you need to know that trick to understanding this story is to see the difference in the reality of Jesus' world and the reality of our world.

Today we see money as something that is relatively natural. As a cultural, we generally think it is what you do with your money that makes it good or bad. Philanthropy, good;

drugs, bad. But in Luke's gospel we constantly see messages that money itself corrupts. Luke suggests over and over again, that with more money comes more corruption. Luke gives us the message of the Beatitudes—blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek. Luke's gospel always shows God's glory through the unexpected, through the blind, through the lame, the sick. With the same kind of unexpected twist, Luke tells us about Jesus teaching a lesson that shocks the sensibility of his audience. He shocks them by using the unexpected character of an unethical worker. What can we learn from this character's strange behavior? And, why does Jesus use him to teach this lesson. The answer is simple. Jesus wants to teach us about the value of integrity in our stewardship. If this scumbag of a guy, this weasel, this unethical worker, can think enough to use money in the present to benefit him in the future, then how much more should we who know God, be able to use money in the present to benefit the future.

The parable of the shrewd manager is Jesus's way of teaching us to use our wealth for God's purposes. Jesus shows us a person who is working solely with the world's rules for things. In business it is dog eat dog, look out for numero uno. The shrewd manager followed a system of rules that got him complimented for his shrewdness, but not for his honesty or integrity. In the Kingdom of God, the rules are completely different. In the Kingdom of God, when you do something small for a fellow human being, you are doing something great for the Kingdom of God. The amount doesn't matter, only that you reached out in Christian love, that you treated someone with the grace that you have been shown by your savior.

Jesus doesn't tell us the rest of the story, we don't ever get to find out what happened to the shrewd manager. Did he keep his patrons for whom he had forgiven their debt? Did he find another job? Did he get a good job recommendation from his former employer? His actions leave us wondering about how things turned out for him. Think back to the beginning of the sermon when we talked about doing nice things for people, and then doing nice things for the wrong reasons. That is what the shrewd manager was all about. He went about forgiving the debts of all of his clients, but he doesn't do it for their sakes. He does it so they will be indebted to him. He does it so that he can keep a business relationship with them, and make a living for himself later on. So Jesus tells us, that yes, he is clever, there is no doubt about that, but he is a weasel. We, as the children of God, know better than he did. We know that forgiveness isn't about owing our neighbor something, we know being good stewards of our resources means using what we have today to prepare not just for ourselves, but for God's Kingdom for tomorrow.

So like on a day like today, when we are intentionally celebrating the relationship that this church holds with Gettysburg Seminary, you can take pride in the fact that you do work for the kingdom, by supporting seminary students in many ways. You are a church that participates in the Internship Program, and that is a gift that is beyond measure. Each of you gathered in this room this morning can call yourself a member of the adjunct faculty of Gettysburg Seminary, because you work to teach and train a new pastor. No matter how involved you are in your congregation, you spend time here at least once a week, getting to know a seminarian, giving them feed back on their sermons, their leadership, their gifts for ministry. Without churches like this one, new pastors would go into their first calls with only

their theological books and a glimmer of hope of what their ministry will be like. But the Internship Program makes that different, it gives seminarians a sort of on-the-job training. So don't hold back from talking to them about their ministry, tell your interns where you think they are gifted, and where they could use a little work. But be sure to be gentle when you tell them about those growing edges! Everyone in this room is a kind of multiplier. When you do something to support a minister, when you do something to support the training of ministers, you are affecting countless people down the line that will be influenced by that pastor's ministry. You can't even begin to imagine the kind of impact that your words of encouragement and your training of pastors will have on generations to come. Mark Behenna is going to go on to become a pastor somewhere and impact people you will never meet, or never hear about. Sarah Keilholtz is going to go on to become a pastor somewhere, and impact even more lives. Jim Dunlop is also going to be a pastor somewhere, and impact even more lives.

We work in a different world view than the shrewd manager. The shrewd manager did every thing in his power to look out for himself, but in God's Kingdom, we do every thing in our power to look out for others. I am going to give you just a quick example of this. We are going to do just a little bit more audience participation. Some of you have been given "round things." When you go shopping and you are shopping for one of these round things, what are you shopping for? This is sort of a trick question. Anybody? A melon — wrong. You are actually shopping for a "thump." You would smell the melon, give it a little squeeze, or maybe you will give it a thump. You are shopping for the best thump that you can find. Now, "Yellow Things." When you are shopping for one of these yellow things, what are you shopping for? Ripeness, color? O.K. You are shopping for a skin. You are shopping for the least amount of brownness, maybe a little hint of green so you know it is tart on the inside. What I am going for here is that when you shop for fruit, you want evidence of how it is on the inside and fruit doesn't lie about what is going on in the inside. It's got evidence of what is going on, on the outside.

When a person has the Kingdom of God, the resurrection, in their heart, it is evidence of what is going on outside. What happens inside is evidenced outside. Jesus gave us the story of the shrewd manager to show us how it looks when we don't live by grace. As I approach the end of seminary, there is so much that I still have to learn about God. But one thing that I do know for sure is that the Gospel challenges me everyday to do my very best for God because my sins are forgiven. In today's gospel the shrewd manager was doing his best, but his best efforts were saved to cover his tracks after a life time of misdeed. When we do our best for God, the outcome is different. When we do our best for God, we see the hungry get fed, we see care for people in need, we see love in action in numerous ways. So the gospel's charge for us today is this: What do people see in your actions that tells them about the people of God? What things are you doing for others because your life is filled with God's grace? Seize the opportunity to let others see your life and glorify your father who is in heaven.

Amen.

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