

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. James Cobb

September 19, 2004
Trinity Lutheran Church

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

Grace to you today and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I received this invitation to come as the representative of Gettysburg Seminary to Trinity Church Camp Hill, I was nervous for two reasons. The first reason is this, on the very first Sunday that I had accepted this new call to the seminary staff; it was the first Sunday in November 1999. The seminary president was Dr. Darold Beekmann, and Dave Clark worked in development, and they said "Come along with us. We're going to Trinity Camp Hill, and you can see sort of what we do on a seminary Sunday." Well, I sat in the back of the contemporary service. During that service there was the children's sermon when a lady brought out a whole series of horses. All the children knew the names of all those horses, and at one point she brought out a little black horse with a white tab and called it Pastor Pony. At that moment I leaned over to a person in the back row and said, "If that's a pastor pony, I hope that it's a thoroughbred and not a donkey" (only I used a colloquialism for donkey). By the coffee hour, the story was all over the church. Dr. Beekmann motioned me over and he said, "What did you call the Pastor Pony?"

Also on that Sunday, people came to tell me about a prospective student for seminary. A person that was related somehow to Susquehanna University. Someone whose name was Jim. And during that same coffee hour, I said to the father, "I understand your son is interested in ministry". And Jim Dunlop, and he said, "No. That person who is interested would be me." Well he came to seminary, and now he's a senior – in spite of my faux pas that day.

I went back to seminary to learn a new fact – that since my graduation, when we had all come directly out of college, now that age span had broadened and we had someone who had recently graduated from seminary and would be celebrating their twenty-first birthday in the fall semester and we had someone who was seventy years in that entering class. That is a huge span. Pastor Hardy is correct – very few in this congregation are left out of any of that span, so if you want to come to seminary, talk to me after church.

Those are the two reasons I was nervous. I had put my foot in my mouth at least twice on that very first Sunday of coming to a new call and in sharing that day here at Trinity Camp Hill. I hope that I have learned to be a little bit more careful, to listen more closely, and assume nothing based on reference to my own seminary days.

A second reason that I worried today had to do with one of our students who came with me this morning and is in the other service, Sarah Vorhees. In her second year at

seminary, and now in her fourth year, she is the Chapel Assistant at Gettysburg College. Once two years ago, she invited me to preach and during the service we noticed a misprint in the bulletin; instead of introducing me as Associate Dean for Lifelong Learning, it said Associate Dean for Lifelong Leaning and we began to laugh. We'd catch each other's eye, couldn't get over a little bit of laughter through the whole service, and then got to the hymn of the day and it was "Leaning on the Everlasting Arm" and then we were gone. So, the seminary sends us out today in tandem. The church has to watch out – some humor may erupt, and here we are, whatever may come.

But we are here today at Trinity Church first and most importantly, to say thank you to his congregation. Over the many years of Trinity's history, you have offered prayers for our seminary. Over the years you have sent students into ministry. You have nurtured and encouraged younger and older persons with gifts for ministry. Over the years you have given offerings and gifts, and responded to special appeals to help us undergird the seminary and strengthen its financial base, and you have provided resources to carry out our mission: to educate, to inform, and to form leaders for the church's mission. We're thankful. We're thankful for Linda and Frank Leber; Linda is serving as Coordinator of the Friends of the Seminary and Frank is presently on our Board. I remember a couple of summers ago at a church-wide assembly, getting to sit with Pastor Hardy at a number of meals and coming to appreciate his unique wit and humor and the great pastoral heart that he has for the congregational ministry here to which he is called. And we thank you, too, for receiving our students as interns who are in this place for special relationship and training for the ministry to which they are called.

We want to invite your participation into the things we do at seminary, and this morning at the display board out in the reception area, there is a special golden page that has our Seminary on Saturdays for Lay People. On the first three Saturdays in November, two professors will lecture each of those Saturday mornings. You can pick up that page, and we hope that you will come (as some have in these past two years) to these Saturdays in November.

Last January in your annual meeting as a congregation, you did something that we considered to be a unique and really extraordinary and the first of its kind moment. This congregation, in a goal written from its Mission Statement, included the seminary saying that you would partner with us: by praying for our seminary community; by growing in giving to the church and the seminary; by continuing with the internship program and offering other educational opportunities; by encouraging youth and lay participation in theological education; by identifying and nurturing candidates for ministry; and by serving as a friend of the seminary congregation and thereby pursuing excellence in ministry. Those really are unique goals for a congregation to speak them that particularly and to include them as goals within your mission. I hope this form will be taken and used by other congregations across our Synod and region, and we thank you for the creative and unique ways that you cement the partnership between Trinity congregation and Gettysburg Seminary.

These words become a kind of bridge to the Gospel text for today from St. Luke. It is a parable that is often misunderstood, in that we hear it first and begin to make all kinds of assumptions about what we've just heard. We get a sense that Jesus, or the master, is commending something that is dishonest. He does not. What he commends is shrewdness. Jesus says that children of the light – that's you and me, the ones who follow Christ – need much more shrewdness. Eugene Peterson, in a paraphrase of this New Testament passage, puts it like this; he says, "Now here's a surprise. The master praising a crooked manager. But why? Because he knew how to look out for himself. Street wise people are smarter than law abiding citizens in this way. 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 and for what is just. Using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on bare essentials, so that you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

So, how are God's people, how are children of the light, street smart? I've seen a few examples in the congregations I've served. The best evangelist I've ever known in a congregation was a five year old child. He was in kindergarten. He liked church a lot, and he would ask students in his kindergarten class what they did on Sundays. If they said nothing, he invited them. He invited Timmy, and Timmy came to church. Then he invited Timmy's brothers and sisters, and they came to church. And then Timmy's mom came along one Sunday, and the next thing we knew, an entire family was being baptized just because a kindergarten kid was an evangelist and opened his mouth and made an invitation. That's shrewd.

Another example: A retired carpenter single handedly helped the church building with all kinds of chores by simply starting a job jar – paper slips indicating things that needed to be done so that anyone at any time could come in and take on a small task. Shrewd.

Another example: There was a name-brand store that opened a franchise branch right across from our church, and a member of the soup kitchen staff went over and asked what happens to these perishables when you have to remove them from your shelves? And an arrangement was made, much like the biblical gleaners in the Old Testament, where we can take it and people could eat. It was shrewd to ask, and it was shrewd to give.

Another example: We had a church musician whose children had recitals from time to time in instrumental or vocal offerings, and the musician said tell us when your recitals come up and he was then able to use those children in Sunday school openings. And when the church cheers you on, what a load of affirmation is heaped on our children and youth! It's shrewd.

Another example: Our Vacation Church School children bought a cow once in the Heifer Project, and they bought bricks in a Habitat Project, and they bought a grain mill in Tanzania . . . and they had all of these things cut out like jigsaw puzzles until their offerings made the whole thing appear in front of them. That was shrewd.

Another example: One of the church's retired couples volunteered to go to Tanzania for the dedication. While there, they found out that there were new facilities for handicapped children. They returned home and spent the next three years until an entire school was built. There was no slow down in retirement for this couple, and there was a whole new sense of purpose for their energies and for their money. And that was shrewd.

Another example: We had health care workers in the congregation who got together and saw a parish nurse program evolve into a visitation group for new moms and babies, and for the elderly who were confounded with multiple problems about health and insurance and transition questions. These health care ministries offered classes on sexuality for our children and youth. They began wellness programs like aerobics classes several times a week in empty rooms in the church. That was shrewd.

In the congregation we've always had good doses of information and communication about parish needs, but there are always for every congregation three primary missions that are often off the screen in the local parish: world hunger, global missions, and theological education. But these mission priorities of our parishes have to find ways, just as the morning is to be a "connector" time, of bringing one of these into our vision, into our life, to raise our consciousness, and to remind us that this mission is our mission.

Congregations, such as Trinity Church, have all kinds of stories like this that are fizzing and popping and exploding all over the place. I see them in the bulletins. I see them in your newsletters. I hear them from your members. From today's parable, there is no commendation for any dishonest action, but we commend what Jesus commends. Be alert. Look for new angles. Let us survive by our wits. Let the people of God be street smart for the sake of mission. And for the sake of what is right and just and expected of us as children of the light, so that it may be said that we who are faithful in little things are faithful in large things as well. For true riches have been entrusted to you, the people of Trinity Church: riches of wealth, riches of time, riches of talents and abilities, riches of this very Gospel word of life in Christ Jesus. So we're invited to shrewdness. Be shrewd, creative, persistent, faithful – that God may one day say, "Well done, good and faithful servants. Children of the light."

Amen.