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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
September 18, 2022  
Pentecost 15

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers, when we pastors sit down to begin to work on our Sunday sermon, we of course read the texts for the upcoming Sunday.

And then we might look at the texts in their original languages, Greek and Hebrew, to see if there are issues related to the translation from the original languages to the English.

Oftentimes, some things get lost in translation.

And then after that, we might consult Bible commentaries.

Bible commentaries are reference books produced by contemporary Biblical scholars, which help explain the text.

So, Bible commentaries are quite useful.

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Now, what is very interesting about today's Gospel text, is here we find commentary on a text within the Bible itself.

You see, ancient writers took it upon themselves to give commentary on this gospel text, and this commentary was included right after the text.

Indeed, verses 9 through 13 consists of that commentary, which is meant to explain the story that comes before it, that story which is called the Parable of the Dishonest Manager.

Now, why would they do that?

Why would these ancient writers take the time to include commentary with this story?

Why? But because this story must have been very troubling to those who heard it in ancient times.

So troubling the story was that writers felt the need to explain it.

And we would have to agree, wouldn't we? We would have to agree that it is quite troubling.

I mean, here we have a manager who is found to be squandering his master's property.

And so this manager is to be let go by his master.

But the manager comes up with a scheme so that when he is let go, he will not be left destitute.

And so he proceeds to call in his master's debtors, and proceeds to gain their support by reducing the debt of each.

One owed a hundred jugs of olive oil. To which the manager says, "Make it fifty."

Another owed a hundred containers of wheat. To which the manager says, "Make it eighty."

And then what happens? Does the master punish his manager?

Does the master have the manager flogged for deceiving him?

Does the master have the authorities come and arrest him so that he might be tried for theft?

No, the master does none of that.

Instead, the master commends his dishonest manager.

The master commends the dishonest manager.

And we can see then why this story is so troubling.

It smacks in the face of all that is right and above board.

It smacks in the face integrity and morality.

It smacks in the face of the seventh commandment: Thou shall not steal.

And as a result the ancient writers tried to explain this parable with the commentary we find in verses 9 through 13.

But notice that none of the words found in the commentary really fit the situation.

Just listen to some of the explanations of the ancient writers.

“Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

And again, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. And whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much,”

And again, “if then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?”

And again, “if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?”

And again, “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love or the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

None of those explanations really works with the parable, do they?

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Now, the original and true explanation of the parable may be found in the words of verse 8, which says, “For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

“For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

In other words, Jesus seems to be admonishing his followers here, telling them that they need to be more crafty, like those in everyday business, if they hope to spread the Gospel, if they hope to grow the church.

It makes me think of that 2002 movie *Catch Me If You Can*, which is based on the autobiography by Frank Abagnale, who says he impersonated a pilot, a doctor, and a lawyer, when he was but a teenager, and while being chased by the FBI.

He had forged a great deal of checks, and was eventually caught.

But then the U.S. government was crafty and shrewd enough, so as to decide to employ Frank and put his skills of forgery to good use to discover other forgeries.

How much of the story is actually true is debated, but the point is that the U.S. government was shrewd enough to employ the skills of an adept forger?

And this is not unlike Jesus' message here in our gospel.

We as Christians need to be shrewd, we need to be crafty, we need to employ our ingenuity, in like manner as those who are astute in the ways of the world, so that we can spread the Gospel and grow the Church.

Now, is Jesus telling us to break the law?

Is Jesus saying to us that there are no holds barred?

That we can do whatever is necessary to achieve the goal?

No. I don't think this is what Jesus is getting at.

But I think this parable is meant to grab our attention, is meant to make us pause and think.

And certainly did that in the ancient world, so much so that ancient writers tried to soften its message.

But, the point is still the same.

We have to think outside the box. We have to imagine new and even radical possibilities.

To be sure, we have to do "church" differently from how we have been doing it in the past.

For the world, sisters and brothers in Christ, is not the same as that which it once was.

There was a time when going to church was a priority on a Sunday morning for the average American.

There was a time when Sunday was sacred, when activities and businesses would not dare think to intrude on the Church's hallowed time.

Even Wednesday's were at one point held sacred because of Catechism class, or Wednesday youth activities.

There were even what were called "Blue Laws," laws restricting and banning certain activities on Sunday's

But, that is no longer the case.

The world has changed. How our country's populace looks at the importance of Church—as the place of worship, as a place of spiritual healing, as a local community center, as the focus of hope—how our country's populace looks at the church has drastically changed.

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Now, one of the things I think Our Saviour Lutheran can be proud of, is our ability as a congregation to adapt, to think shrewdly.

It is true throughout our history.

In the 1960s, this congregation had the wherewithal to realize that it needed to move from downtown Harrisburg.

The members of the congregation realized that if they didn't move, they might not survive.

People didn't want to come to the church in the evening. There were concerns about feeling safe. And parking had become an issue.

And so, the congregation decided to move.

That was shrewd. That was visionary. And so the congregation adapted.

And again, when this congregation realized that they were losing young members after they were confirmed, because confirmation was seen as a sort of graduation from church...

Makes me think of that bad church joke: How do you get bats out of the church belfry? You confirm them, and you will never see the bats again.

Ha ha, right? But there is a vein of truth there, which is why it is funny.

And so, this is why this congregation developed the Scholarship Program, to provide an incentive to our young people to continue to be active in church.

And that was shrewd. That was visionary.

So we have some practice as a congregation in thinking shrewdly.

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Now, as you know, the congregation council, your leadership team here at church, is in the process of conducting a visionary program.

You have heard me talk about this for the past couple of weeks in the announcements.

You have read about it in the bulletin and in the newsletter.

And hopefully, each of us has signed up for one of the town meetings we have scheduled in October.

And hopefully, each of us has picked up the three forms out on the table in the narthex by those town meeting sign-up sheets, and hopefully we have begun to think about the questions on those forms.

For we need to consider how we might continue to think shrewdly for the sake of the Gospel that the Gospel may continue to be shared in this place in the present time and in future years to come.

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Now, I say all of this with a big caveat. And the big caveat is this.

We need to do our visioning not from a state of fear, not from a state of survival mode.

We should not act with the mindset of “what do we need to do in order to keep our doors open.”

We should not act with the mindset of how we can pay our bills.

No church should operate with that mindset, because then we fall into the notion that we need more members so that we can maintain the church building.

And the church building then becomes our god.

No, instead we should operate, always operate from the mindset of how we can serve the Gospel of Jesus Christ most faithfully out in the world, how we can proclaim God's love to the world, and how we can bring others to a relationship with Jesus Christ.

That is our goal. That is what we are called to do.

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And so then we start with our strengths. We start with our assets. We start from the gifts we have received from God.

And as our Gospel text today is wont to say, our most important asset is the relationships we foster and nurture.

When the dishonest manager knew he was going to be let go, he used his strengths, which in his case was his ability to be shrewd and to envision and to adapt, and he started then to develop relationships with others.

That is not a bad way to proceed.

Similarly, we need to foster relationships, which brings me to another way this congregation has been shrewd in the past, that is, by creating our GermanFest event, so that we might share our German heritage with the community, but that we might also create opportunities to develop relationships with other people.

And over the years, many persons have come to be members of our church family here through our GermanFest event. That also was shrewd. It was visionary.

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So, I share all these thoughts with you today, as we strive to make sense of this challenging Gospel text.

It is good lesson for us to ponder as we work to envision our future.

And let me just say that God, who is our Master, will not let us go, even though we may feel like the manager in the story sometimes.

Even though we may be fearful of our church's future, of what might happen to us.

But in such uncertainty, let us cast fear aside, and let us be shrewd.

Let us envision together a future where we may be proud of serving the Gospel and of knowing that we are commended by God, as the master commended the manager.

Let us think outside the box.

Let us imagine new and radical possibilities.

Let us consider how we can do “church” differently, and yet do it faithfully.

Thanks be to God. Amen.