

Proper 20C 2019 Sermon

Luke 16:1-13

Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

"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. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Sherlock Holmes, speaking to his colleague Dr. Watson, describes the attributes of his arch-nemesis, Professor Moriarty. Holmes says: "He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city [of London]. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order."¹

Every bone in Sherlock Holmes' body detests the evil that Professor Moriarty commits; nonetheless, Holmes cannot help but have a begrudging admiration for Moriarty and his clever schemes.

That is what is happening in today's Gospel parable: Word comes to a rich man that the manager of his estate is squandering his money. The rich man calls the manager on the carpet, ordering him to account for all that his debtors owe him; and then the rich man is going to let the manager go. His survival now threatened, the manager says to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. Ah! I know what I'll do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." He plots a scheme to "cook

the books,” calling each of the rich man’s debtors, and changing the loan papers of each to reflect that each debtor does not owe quite as much as he actually owes. He conspires with the debtors to lessen the burden of their debt by deceit and trickery. These debtors will then be beholden to the manager, and they will care for him after he loses his job. Deceitful and wrong? Yes; but it is also shrewd and clever.

When our physical or social survival is at stake and we are backed into a corner, we humans can become remarkably creative in finding ways to survive. I know a homeless veteran who has befriended a clerk at a convenience store. In the hot weather, this homeless vet goes into the store, fills a cup with ice and water (for which the clerk does not charge him), goes to the area on the counter where there were little bins of individual sugar packets available for coffee or tea, empties some of the packets into the water, takes some little packets of lemon juice and empties them into the water, and *voila!* – he has free lemonade!

We humans, like the rich man’s shrewd manager in Jesus’ parable, and like my homeless veteran friend, can get very wise and resourceful when our physical or social survival is at stake.

In today’s parable, Jesus tells his disciples: “the children of this age are wiser in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” Fr. John Shea comments: “I consider the children of this age and the children of light to be the *same* children seen from different perspectives. When our consciousness is immersed in physical and social life, we are children of this age. As children of this age, we are quick to sense any threat to our physical and social life and we spring into action. We will find food and shelter and we are ingenious in how we do it. Nothing will stand in our way. Our survival is our priority.

“But we are also children of light whose consciousness has been illumined by the Good News that Jesus teaches. We are aware that we have a soul relationship to God that simultaneously makes us brothers and sisters to one another. However, **this** consciousness is threatened on all sides. Powerful *internal* and *external* factors seek to overwhelm it. But we are not *alert* to them and we do not struggle against them. Therefore, we are not galvanized into action to save our *spiritual* life the way we are galvanized to save our physical and social lives. We are shrewd in the ways of the world, but we are **not** shrewd in the ways of the Spirit. We need to be instructed.”²

My friends, I find this SO true in my own life! A large majority of the time, I am living as a “child of this age,” concerned and worried and caught up in the physical and social happenings of life: going to the office, writing sermons and choosing hymns for the coming Sunday, visiting folk, attending meetings, preparing for Men 4 Him or Faith-Seeking Journey classes, putting together the weekly Belltower, reading articles and books and the news, driving to Denver on Wednesdays, and, of course, the mundane chores of mowing the lawn, feeding the

dog, tending my roses, going grocery shopping, and on and on. It is so easy for me to get *totally* wrapped up in the physical and social aspects of life that I neglect the **spiritual** – which is the *only* part of my life that will survive death.

I am currently listening to an audiobook co-authored by an astrophysicist and a physician, titled *You are the Universe*. The authors note that a majority of physicists and cosmologists refuse even to **consider** the possibility that meaning, consciousness, mind, purpose, spirit – whatever one chooses to call it – is inherent in the universe itself. And yet, as the authors point out, quantum theory shows that simply by our observing a beam of light shining through 2 slits in a piece of cardboard, the observer *changes* whether light is a wave or a particle. Somehow, the human mind and consciousness is wrapped up in the quantum world of photons and electromagnetic waves.³ The spiritual, relational world is very real, indeed.

But our modern Western mindset is such that the “real” world comprises what we can “objectively” see, touch, smell, hear, taste, or measure. The realm of spirit is not detected by any of our 5 senses, nor can it be measured. So, in our rational, scientific mindset, the *spiritual* world seems suspect, uncertain, unprovable; and therefore, *less important* – **if** it exists at all. So we tend to ignore our soul, our spirit. But there is a price to pay.

John Shea tells of a gifted cancer surgeon who complained, “I can barely make myself get out of bed most mornings. I hear the same complaints day after day, I see the same diseases over and over again. I just don't care anymore. I need a new life.” Fr. Shea remarks, “He is still plodding along, doing work, and sitting up and taking nourishment. But zest for his work has disappeared. He is no longer in conscious contact with his soul...

“... He has learned a way of life that screens out spirit. The result is he has to keep on going without what spirit provides—pleasure, passion, purpose...”⁴

In telling the parable of the dishonest but clever manager, Jesus is posing for us this question: “Why does one put such tremendous time, energy, and creativity into one’s physical and social survival, while not doing *anything* to further the survival and growth of soul and spirit – which is the only part of a person that will survive death?”

“We are not shrewd at keeping the spirit alive,” writes Fr. Shea. “Our much-vaunted ability to spring into action when threatened does not transfer to the spiritual level.”⁵

Jesus says, “The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” And **we** are *both*: children of *this* age **and** children of light. We’ve got the “children of this age” down pat; but what must we do to keep our **spirit** alive, to thrive as the children of light? Fr. Shea

suggests, “We must become as alert and responsive when our **spirits** are threatened as we are when our [physical or] social position is threatened.”⁶

My friends, the good news is that there are ways to strengthen our alertness and responsiveness to the spiritual part, the most important and enduring part, of ourselves! Coming here each week to worship God with one another, listen to Scripture and sermon, sing hymns, offer prayers, and partake in the sacramental body and blood of Christ is a huge step in the direction of being reminded that we are children of light! Praying daily and reading the Bible, devotionals, or other spiritual material is also a tremendous help. Spiritual practices such as Centering Prayer, meditation, going on retreat, and any number of other practices can be life-changing (they have been for me). Consciously reminding ourselves (and one another!) each day to be aware of God’s presence all around us: in the blue sky, butterflies, the scent of a rose, leaves changing colors, the face of a baby, the excited wagging of a dog’s tail, the taste of a freshly picked garden tomato, the miracle of each life-giving breath we take. And as we practice these things over time, we may find that the child of light that is within us becomes even wiser than the child of this age.

AMEN

- 1 Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*
- 2 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 266-267
- 3 Deepak Chopra, M.D., and Menas C. Kafatos, PhD, *You Are the Universe: Discovering Your Cosmic Self and Why It Matters*, New York: Harmony Books, 2017
- 4 Shea, *ibid.*, pp. 269-270
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 270
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 268