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17th Sunday after Pentecost
All Saints Episcopal Church

*And his master commended the dishonest manager
because he had acted shrewdly.*

C.H. Dodd, a New Testament Scholar and Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University for much of the 20th Century, offered in 1935 a definition of a parable that is still the best one out there: "A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." (C.H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 1935, p. 5)

Strangeness. Sufficient doubt. Yes, I think this story definitely fills the bill! This story has always given me sufficient doubt. It definitely teases my mind into something. As a matter of fact, this is one of the things that irritated people the most about Jesus' parables - they didn't want their minds teased into active thought. Commentators cannot seem to agree on what it means; one scholar believes this, another believes that. So let's see if we can tease our minds for a bit and figure out how this parable may depict what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, observes that the story of the dishonest steward, or manager, rates as our least favorite parable of Jesus. Not a surprise. The man cheats his boss, he is dishonest about why he is reducing the amount owed by the boss' debtors, and in the end he comes out smelling like a rose! What's to love?!

Hold on, though. We hate the scandal of this story, but it is this very same scandal that we love in the parable immediately before this one! Separated only by an arbitrary chapter division, today's parable is meant to be read along with the parable of the lost son - the Prodigal Son - which just so happens to be our most favorite parable of Jesus. The parable of the Lost Son comes between last week's parables and today's - left out by the lectionary elves for now and saved for another time.

You remember last week's parables - the lost sheep and the lost coin - and the next one, completing the chapter, which we did not read - the lost son. Obviously, they

are all about being lost and found. Now, today, the dishonest manager...is that supposed to be lost and found, too?

There are a number of similarities in these two stories. Both of the parables concern people in inferior positions who squander wealth and break the covenantal relationships they have with their superiors. Both of them 'wake up' to their true situations and devise plans to get back some of their lost dignity. Both of them get a response to their plans that is totally different from that which they expected. The father, ignoring the prodigal's plan that would impose by-the-book justice that was at the same time insufficiently gracious, would not have a slave, but a son. The Boss did not respond to his manager as a first-class swindler, but commended him for his shrewdness instead. And neither story ties everything up in a neat little package for us, but they both leave us with lots of possibilities for supplying the endings ourselves.

The main thread, however, between these two parables is an uncommon Greek verb translated in both stories as 'squandering' - the lost son "squandered his property in dissolute living" (15:13) and the manager was "squandering his [boss'] property." The context is negative: misused, wasted, thrown away. But this Greek word is more commonly translated as "broadcasting or scattering" of something such as seed - disseminating, distributing, giving out. A positive connotation.

Why am I making a big deal about this particular word? Well, it seems to me that depending on the character we are discussing, the definition of squandering changes. Of course, both the main characters of the 2 parables misuse or are wasteful of the wealth that is given to them to manage. On the one hand, though, we have a beloved scandal, and on the other, we have, well, a scandalous scandal!

We know that in Luke's gospel, Jesus is all about the good news being proclaimed to the poor. But we can see in all of these parables how persistently Jesus interacts with the rich, not just to condemn them but to save them as well. His appeal in the parables of chapter 15 is for the older brother to rejoice in the embrace of the younger brother - for the Pharisees to rejoice in the embrace of sinners. In chapter 16, his aim is for the rich/the Pharisees to display the same shrewdness as the manager, who is the recipient of 'scandalous grace.'

The definition of squandered has now changed. This grace is squandered - scattered, broadcast by a generous God - scattered by the loving father on the

son, scattered by the boss on the manager, scattered by God on us! This is outrageous, Divine generosity squandered on all of us.

So what does this have to do with us? With the Church? Well, what if the real objective for The Church is to train and nurture every follower of Jesus as agents of God's radical and outrageous generosity? What if we were to go out on the streets and start giving away forgiveness and membership and healing and salvation? What if we advertised baptism services for anyone that wanted to show up and be baptized? Maybe that's a little too scary. What if we freely offered other gifts of the church to the average person on the street? Not to then insist that they show up at our doors so that we can offer them Christian hospitality and that they do and act the way we want them to do and act. What if we offered the hospitality on the street?

In 2004, an Australian named Juan Mann was depressed about his life, the direction it was going, the lack of people who loved and supported him in his life. He went to a party one night and, out of the blue, a "random person" as he recalls, came up to him and gave him a hug. He was overwhelmed by the generosity of this person and it changed his life.

He began to think that if a simple hug could transform him, it could transform others. So he made a sign on a piece of poster paper that said FREE HUGS and began standing on the sidewalks and in the malls in his city, holding this sign in the air. At first, people passed him by, thinking he was crazy. But then, ever-so-slowly, one person took a chance, and another, and then another. And then someone he knew, who knew his story, and who was in a band (the Sick Puppies), filmed him on the street and put it to music that his band played. And then it was posted on YouTube. And the rest, as they say, was history. That video has had over 60,000,000 hits. Now people all over the world are giving away free hugs and feeling transformed.

At St. Gregory of Nyssa, an Episcopal church in San Francisco, staff members have taken ashes and oil to the transit stations on Ash Wednesday, standing amongst the crowds traveling to and fro, asking if they would like to receive the ashes or a prayer. The response is overwhelming. People say "the Church has never come to me before" or they say nothing at all but a small murmur of thanks. They are overwhelmed. The church staff are overwhelmed. This is the outrageous squandering of God's love!

It's scary. We aren't used to this sort of demonstrative action. But we can't just be the recipients of this love and then hold onto it with a death grip. If we don't give it away, it will shrivel up and so will we. So come on! Let us be scandalous in our squandering. It is the way of the kingdom of God!