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St. Stephen's Church, San Jose

Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1 Jeremiah mourns for his people because of their apostasy.

Psalm 79:1-9

1 Tim 2:1-7 Pray for everyone, lead a life of godliness and dignity.

Luke 16:1-13 The parable of the shrewd manager.

Jeremiah – What must God do to change people's apathy?

1 Timothy – is instruction on how we should pray; prayer offered to all people, because God's grace is universal; prayer for civil leaders; prayer as an outgrowth of our unity in the community.

Luke – on the surface looks like it is license by Jesus to be shrewd, cunning and dishonest like the shrewd manager, but be shrewd and cunning for the sake of God's Kingdom.

Obviously, that is completely inconsistent with every other teaching of Jesus. But there are characteristics of the manager that could be the point to this teaching. The manager was thoughtful about what he would do in his situation; and he was decisive. He immediately took action. There is teaching in thoughtfulness and decisiveness... but for the Kingdom of God.

Do we make deliberate decisions about our spiritual life, or do we let life 'happen', and hope that God will burst in to transform us? I spent most of my youth asking God to show himself to me; just send a shooting star across the sky - on my command; or have someone completely change their personality – on my command. But what I have found is that God has transformed me, to be a presence that helps people see God's presence through my presence. So I learned to be decisive about making myself available to be an effective presence, to be a channel for God's presence to be felt by others.

Regarding thoughtfulness, I think of Frances Steitz' decision to find a card, blank on the inside, to get everyone in the congregation to make notes inside, and to send it to Ken and Sandy Redder as a statement of how much we miss them. Sandy came to church for the next two Sundays, with tears in her eyes over knowing she had been missed. It was a little effort that produced a wonderful blessing for Ken and Sandy.

The little things count; they matter to God; they make a difference; and they reveal where our heart is.

We need to remember the power of a kind word, giving a warm smile, offering a prayer,

even when we're tired, even when we're worried about something, even when we don't feel like it. The little things matter.

How we manage the little, momentary relationships; and what seem like interruptions in our day; and how we manage whatever resources God has given us, indicate where our heart is. And revealing where our heart is will determine whether God will entrust us with more; both here and in heaven.

None of our life is 'minor' or 'unimportant' to God. Every event, large or small, holds the power to change lives - both our own life and the lives of the people around us.

On FB last night, a priest friend of mine in England commented about needing to preach on this most difficult Gospel lesson. There was a flurry of comments back to her; with one clergy saying how grateful he was that today he has a blessing on a 50th anniversary, and can ignore the difficult reading altogether. Another clergy said she was lucky, the bishop was visiting, and she had selected different readings for her visit. There was world-wide conversation last night about this Gospel reading today!

But the point for me is about thoughtfulness, and being decisive, and paying attention to the little things, which equip us for the big things in life.

I pray that you are thoughtful and decisive about being a good manager of even the little things God entrusts to you. And I pray that the choices you make about little things and big things are choices that bring honor to God. Amen.

The story in today's Gospel reading is called the Parable of the Shrewd Manager. It is considered one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand. Is Jesus really teaching that his disciples should be dishonest like the manager in the story? On FB last night, a priest friend of mine in England commented about needing to preach on this Gospel lesson. There was a flurry of comments back to her; with one clergy saying how grateful he was that today he has a blessing on a 50th anniversary, and can ignore the difficult reading altogether.

Some bible scholars believe this parable encourages the disciples to be shrewd and decisive like the manager was. In the same way that the unrighteous are shrewd and decisive in the ways of the world, the righteous should be like that in matters of the Kingdom of God.

It would be very inconsistent in Jesus' character to be suggesting that the deception and cheating of the manager in the story was a good thing. In fact, the moral Jesus gives to the story is that 'you cannot serve God and wealth'. But the manager was quick in his decision how to handle the situation. So one message from this reading is for us to not waver, but to be decisive in our decision to follow Jesus.

Do we make deliberate decisions about our spiritual life, or do we let life 'happen', and hope that God will burst in to transform us? I spent most of my youth asking God to show himself to me; just send a shooting star across the sky - on my command; or have someone completely change their personality - on my command. But what I have found is that God has transformed me, to be a presence that encourages people to decide on living for God. So I hope to be decisive about being effective as that kind of presence.

Some other bible scholars see this parable as a story about handling crisis. The manager faced the crisis of losing his job by sacrificing the commission he would have made on the payments of debts to his master.

They believe that the 'discount' the steward gave each debtor was only the commission he had added onto the actual debt. It was against OT law (Deut 23: 19,20) for Jews to charge each other "interest". So, they had come up with a practice of charging a fee on top of the loan amount; and 50-100% was not unusual. The manager may have just removed his commission from the debts, in which case the master would still receive his full amount. The manager met his 'crisis' by choosing his job over the financial profit he would have made.

The crisis for followers of Jesus is to decide what we are going to do about the demands that Jesus' teachings place on us. Jesus warns his listeners that our response to him will certainly need to include our placing more importance on God than on wealth. The point is not that wealth is bad, but how we use what we have; wealth is a gift from God and should be used to accomplish God's purpose.

With either of these understandings of this parable, Jesus' story is warning the listeners to watch the standards by which we live our lives; including even the little things we do. The little things count; they matter to God; they make a difference; and they reveal where our heart is. Let me give you an example of paying attention to the little things:

Example: the card Francis had us sign so she could send it to Ken and Sandy Redder, brought Sandy to church.

Paying attention to the little things matters; they have the power to change lives.

We need to remember the power of a kind word, giving a warm smile, offering a prayer, even when we're tired, even when we're worried about something, even when we don't feel like it. The little things matter.

How we manage the little, momentary relationships; and what seem like interruptions in our day; and how we manage whatever resources God has given us, indicate where our heart is. And revealing where our heart is will determine whether God will entrust us with more; both here and in heaven.

None of our life is 'minor' or 'unimportant' to God. Every event, large or small, holds the power to change lives - both our own life and the lives of the people around us.

I pray that you are decisive about being a good manager of even the little things He entrusts to you. And I pray that the choices you make about little things and big things are choices that bring honor to God. Amen.

The parable in today's gospel reminds us that **our boundaries between secular and sacred are artificially constructed**. It may seem surprising that Jesus spoke more about money and business than he did about sex. **Yet it is the nitty-gritty stuff of survival, not the rare passion, that occupies most peoples' days.**

**So Jesus uses the common metaphor of money to ask, if we can't keep track of the small change, how can we handle much greater riches?** The network that sustains us is frail, and we are vulnerable. Knowing that uncertainty, we might be tempted to cling to the "sure thing," wealth. Yet money has no intrinsic value. It's how we use it that counts.

**The parable may also be read as a call to resolute action in a time of crisis.** Confronted with a genuine threat to his livelihood, the manager acts shrewdly. His ingenuity in a desperate situation is practical and commendable. In the telling, Jesus comes across as a realist with a sense of humor. What a fine contrast to the stereotype of a limp-wristed, lily-carrying statue clothed in pastels!

Recall the film *Schindler's List*: at first, the hero seems immoral—a womanizer, a liar, a businessman of questionable ethics who fraternizes with the Nazis. Yet through improbable means, this unlikely hero saves the lives of over 1,000 Jews. He epitomizes Jesus' description of the "children of this age, ...more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light" (Luke 16:8).

There were many more Schindlers than people suspected. They utilized the tools of the dishonest for a greater good—saving lives. "Padre Benedetti" ran a busy passport mill in Marseilles, forging documents that enabled Jews to escape into Spain. Aristides de Sousa Mendes, a Portuguese diplomat, violated orders from Lisbon to deny passports. He and a rabbi sat up all night stamping visas that saved 10,000 Jews. Ordinary people—garbage collectors, shopkeepers, postal employees—knew their neighbors were hiding Jews, and remained silent. May we all transform the world with such ordinary—and occasionally subversive—grace and courage.