



“Today I’ll Choose Joy”

Luke 16: 1-14

September 22, 2019

Rev. Jody Andrade

Last week, in our second installment of the *Committed to Joy* series, Rev. Jennie Sankey preached about two parables: The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin. Today’s scripture is another parable from Jesus and is perhaps the most puzzling parable he tells during his entire ministry. This is not a simple story with a beginning, middle and end that finishes with a happy conclusion and justice for all. This is a complex story, and the many layers can mean many different things.

Today we take Rev. Sankey’s message about “looking for what matters,” an essential theme in the Bible, and focus on the end of that phrase. What does matter? Jesus tells this parable about the dishonest manager to the disciples, but in front of a larger audience of many people who have more than enough. This parable is about wealth. This parable is also about the certainty we believe comes with having wealth. I’m reading one verse beyond today’s Revised Common Lectionary reading.

“Then 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. 2 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.’ 3 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. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ 5 So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6 He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 7 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.’ 8 **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. 9 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. 10 “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. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 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. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed [Jesus].”

The dishonest manager worries, “What will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me?” What will happen when my status in the world --and the salary that comes with it --goes away? How many of us have asked ourselves the same question? If you’ve ever uttered the words, “There but for the grace of God go I,” a phrase which, by the way, deserves its very own sermon, then you have asked yourself the same question the manager asks. Who am I without my wealth and status? How different is each of us from the person who will walk through our church office door tomorrow, seeking emergency assistance?

The truth Rev. Sankey named last week, that each of us is a found child of God, may be easier to hear than to really believe. And even if we do believe it, it’s certainly not easy to base our life choices, including our financial decisions, on knowing we are children of God, people who can get lost and for whom God will look until we are found, every single time.

Verse 14: The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed Jesus. I can hear their nervous giggles now—bitter laughter at the threat of the kingdom of God not belonging to them but belonging to all. Fearful snickering about a priesthood of all believers. There is nervous whispering among them about what threat Jesus’ parable posed to the **certainty** of the Pharisees’ status and financial position.

Certainty. Certainty, the idea of “knowing for sure” is the second god that many of us worship. Paul writes in 1st Timothy: “There is ONE God.” Jesus warns in the

parable that it is impossible to serve two gods: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” If we worship money, we cannot worship our Creator.

And yet, I have never gotten down on my knees and bowed down to a stack of green bills. You probably have not fallen prostrate in front of your latest purchase either. Worshipping wealth isn’t always obvious.

Serving two gods is not so much worshipping cash or the objects you buy but worshipping the certainty you believe you are purchasing by keeping riches close at hand. I’ll say it again: serving two gods is not so much worshipping the cash or objects you buy but worshipping the certainty you believe you are purchasing by keeping riches close at hand. The certainty of love from your child because you bought him the exact toy he “needed” for his birthday. The certainty of admiration from your neighbors because you added that bonus area to your house. The certainty of status among your peers because you spent your last dime on a vacation worth bragging about. You won’t find many people in this church buying the latest designer coat for \$10,000, but you surely will find a few of us willing to spend any amount of money to be CERTAIN about something.

Spending all of our resources to prevent uncertainty creates a posture of fear. When you commit in an attempt to stop that fear, there is no room for joy in your life. Fear closes you up, turns you inward, isolates and whispers doubt and unsubstantiated concerns into your ear. Fear makes you protective and closes you up into a tight fist, a fist that makes it easier to punch than to offer a hand to someone else.

When you’re balled up in a tight fist, it’s impossible to commit to joy. When you’re filled with fear, you crouch and cower behind the door of opportunity because of the uncertainty about what lies ahead. Until we release our grip, open our hands, and open our hearts, we can’t experience deep joy in our lives.

If fear is a fist, what does it look like to be wide open? To assume the posture of welcoming joy? Look at this picture and see if you can identify joy.



This is PHPC member Tom Stricker who is one of those crazy people who loves skydiving precisely because it forces him to let go, to move from fear to joy. Tom says, “The bliss comes from approaching an event that creates a great deal of anxiety before the event. [Joy comes from] accepting the fear and stepping past that portal through to the experience of viewing the wide world from 10,000 feet with no support but a thin film of nylon and some nylon cord.”¹ If this were a photo of me, you would see absolutely no joy in this picture. But Tom assures us, it gives him joy.

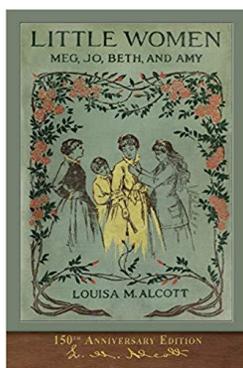
And if you look closely at this picture, there’s another essential source of support beyond the nylon cord—someone who knows what they’re doing riding right there with you from the first to the final moment. And so it is in life. As we stand in the doorway, afraid of what lies ahead, God stands beside us, whether we remain stuck or leap forward. If we remain, God comforts us in our fear and our anxiety. But if we do go, if we take the leap into the unknown, God goes with us there too. And we will find joy in the leap and in landing on the other side.

Is it good to save for a rainy day—yes! Should you forgo living fully, embracing joy through commitment, because you fear the future? No! Live now!

In Louisa May Alcott’s 150-year-old novel Little Women, the character Laurie says about wealth: “It’s not half so sensible to leave legacies when one dies as it is to use the money wisely while alive, and enjoying one’s fellow-creatures happy with it.”² Alcott is pointing out the joy to be found in releasing the grip of fear and committing to an open posture of generosity.

¹ Paraphrase of Tom Stricker, email to Rev. Jody Andrade, August 16, 2019.

² Louisa M. Alcott, *Little Women*, SeaWolf Press, 2019, p. 501.



In her memoir I Am I Am I Am, Maggie O'Farrell describes her seventeen near death experiences. After surviving so much, O'Farrell observes, "I viewed my continuing life as an extra, a bonus, a boon: I could do with it what I wanted . . . I had an insatiable desire to push myself to embrace all that it could offer."³ O'Farrell has stared down fear, looked death in the eye, and now wants to leap toward joy.

We get to be bold about life because as Christians, we have escaped death. We worship a risen Lord. We are invited by Him to turn away from fear and commit to joy.

Verse 8 of today's scripture says: "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." The children of this age, the shrewd thinkers, are the non-Christians. The children of light are Christ's followers.

This complicated parable from Jesus is also a lesson about decision making. The master commends the manager's shrewd behavior. He applauds the manager's cunning in finding a way forward. Perhaps Christ is urging his followers to make a choice and get off the fence. To decide to move away from fear and our impossible attempts to purchase certainty. Maybe this parable is saying, *Being Christian doesn't mean being naïve. It doesn't mean throwing all caution to the wind. Being Christian means being shrewd and decisive. It means being smart in how we use our time, talent and treasure. It means not turning a blind eye to how and where we commit our resources.*

A kind but casual Christian volunteers when he has nothing else to do. He writes a check when he enjoys a worship service. A shrewd, decisive Christian commits to

³ Maggie O'Farrell, *I Am I Am I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2018, 239.

meaningful ministries through volunteering and makes an annual financial pledge. A pledge tells your church she can count on you when she makes her plans for ministries in the coming year. Even more so, a pledge is you declaring to yourself and your family where your commitment lies. You won't give the church your leftovers, what time and treasure you have after you've spent those resources here and there in this world. The church's ministries are at the top of your ledger, as a priority. Your pledge is your way of saying you will strive to worship God and only God in 2020.

Unlike simple sayings, parables are thick. They are multi-layered and dense and stretch us to think beyond a simple, sensible conclusion. Parables are more like life itself. A life worth living is thick.

In the book The Second Mountain, David Brooks says, "A thick life is defined by commitments and obligations. The life well lived is a journey from open options to sweet compulsions."⁴

I can't tell you exactly what to take away from this parable because I don't know. I'm in good company in my not knowing, because Biblical scholars can't agree on the parable's meaning either. Scholars say, *Maybe the word house is better translated as tent and Jesus is nodding to a nomadic afterlife*. Scholars say, *Maybe the servant is forgoing his commission in the deals he makes and the master isn't losing any money*. Scholars say, *Maybe the master commends the dishonest manager because his job is to negotiate, to bargain, and at least he's doing that well*.⁵ None of these explanations definitively makes sense of this complex parable. Together, Biblical scholars have thrown up their collective hands. Theologian Charlie Cousar, admitting defeat, writes, "[T]he grappling of God's people with even the difficult parts of God's book, produces a weary but earnest friendship among the children of light in this generation."⁶ That is, we are bonded together in friendship because none of us really understand this parable.

And I'm okay with that.

⁴ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, Random House, 2019, p. 57.

⁵ These assertions are repeated throughout scholarship. Books I referenced include Boring and Craddock eds, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, Levine and Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Taylor and Bartlett, eds, *Feasting on the Word* among others.

⁶ Charlie Cousar in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4*, Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett, eds, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 97.

Committing to Christ means doing my best to follow Him in every way. And Christ, fully human and fully God, said and did things I do not fully understand. My commitment to Christ is not a commitment to certainty. In fact, as a disciple I am committed to uncertainty. I don't have the answers about what every word in the Bible means or even exactly what it means to be a Christian. But I trust in Jesus and do my level best, come what may.

My commitment to this church is the same. My commitment to PHPC is not because I'm certain we hear every whisper from the Holy Spirit and that we do everything exactly right. My commitment is to the uncertainty of PHPC. I don't have the exact answers about which programs will continue and which will go away, which strangers we'll help and who we'll not be able to reach, how people will share Christian love here in new and different ways. I don't know who the new Installed Pastor will be in 2020 and what he or she will preach and envision for the next 20 years. But I trust in the work of Christ through our church. I trust we will always *connect faith with everyday life*. And I glean great joy from my commitment here. My commitment of time and treasure.

"The bliss comes from approaching an event that creates a great deal of anxiety before the event. [Joy comes from] accepting the fear and stepping past that portal through to the experience of viewing the wide world from 10,000 feet with no support but a thin film of nylon and some nylon cord." And with the support of our God who is committed to always finding us.

Today I'll commit to Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church for 2020. Today I'll choose joy. I invite you to make the shrewd decision to move forward with intention. Commit to joy. Make your pledge to your church today.