In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Please be seated. It's usually a good idea to start at the beginning, but not this time. Today I think the best way to start is at the end. At the end of today's Gospel Jesus says "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." That about sums it up.

This parable seems to be a real contradiction of other Biblical truths- a shrewd manager who is winning friends through conniving after he is called out for being a cheat- and the master then commends him. W H A T????

I had really wanted to preach about the Prodigal Son. I thought the reading would **BE** the Prodigal Son- a story I am very familiar with- and talk about often in Bible Study at the Jail where I work 40 hours a week. The inmates can all relate to the Prodigal son. A selfish, rebellious son, who takes his inheritance- early and wastes it on partying and wild women!! He comes to his senses and comes home begging to be a servant- and his father- Our Father- welcomes him and forgives him and rejoices.

Last week we talked about lost silver coins and lost sheep...the next lost parable in Luke is the Prodigal son- but our lectionary has us skipping to the Shrewd Manager. Great!

Superficially, the Shrewd Manager parable appears to present the story of a manager who cheats his master and is commended by Jesus for being a liar and a thief. Which is much harder to preach than a rebellious son who comes back contrite and repentant. But like most of Jesus' parables it is not exactly what it seems, and It is Not really about honesty when dealing with money.

Luke has many stories about money- and they illustrate different aspects of wealth. Stuff is transitory, stuff creates chasms between people, stuff obscures moral vision, stuff destroys moral character,... stuff is a good gift. What? Yes that seems to be part of the point in this parable, the puzzling little story of the dishonest manager

The parable points to the positive potential of money and possessions. By revising the bills of his master's clients, the dishonest manager enriches the lives of others by reducing their indebtedness. And in this way, he builds human relationships that ensure his own "welcome" into thier "homes". Wealth is a good gift with great positive potential for all who are generous toward God and their neighbors in the human community. This message shines through the words of Jesus in surprising but unmistakable fashion. The master "commends" the manager for his "shrewdness" and Jesus likewise urges his disciples to "make friends for themselves by means of dishonest wealth" so that they may find a similar "welcome" in the "eternal homes". That is where the story seems confusing- make friends through dishonest wealth??

I found a helpful analysis of this story based on first century Palestinian cultural understandings:

The original hearer of the parable knew that the primary characteristic of the wealthy master is generosity. The householder in the story must be magnanimous.... [And] because the landowner is wealthy and magnanimous, he forgives the debts and commends the steward. Everyone is blessed by the steward's cleverness. The master will be praised throughout the land for his noble generosity. All will say the landowner is full of grace. He shows compassion. The village is alive with the praise of the generous landowner. He will not try to punish the dishonest steward. Instead he acknowledges the steward's cleverness. A win, win, win, the steward will be able to find another job- as he has made

friends, the master has had his reputation enhanced, and the community has had a weighty debt taken off their backs, and more disposable income to enhance the economy in the community- win, win, win.

The implications of Jesus' story are clear. Money and possessions, even when depicted as "dishonest wealth", can be good gifts with positive potential for blessing others and opening the door to one's own blessedness.

Just as the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector/extortionist who after meeting Jesus decides to repay people in an extravagant way, concludes with a word of "salvation" Luke 19:10)," For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost" so the story of the dishonest manager concludes with words of "welcome" both earthly and "eternal" . In verse 4 The manager thinks to himself- that he has a plan that when he is dismissed people will "welcome me into their homes" and in verse 9 Jesus says "And I tell you, make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth, so when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." The New English Bible translates that verse. "So I say to you, use your worldly wealth to win friends for yourselves, so that when money is a thing of the past, you may be received into an eternal home." Money will be a thing of the past when the end comes- when we die, or when Jesus comes again. Then we will be going to our eternal home.

After being informed of the managers dishonesty, the Master summons the manager and asks, "What is this I hear about you?"

This question is a classic Middle Eastern opener that is used before such a confrontation.

I was a foster parent for many years and the adoptive mother of 13 children. If I got a call from school- about some particularly egregious behavior- I would ask that child upon his return home- "So, how was school today?" and I would be very interested in the child's body language, facial expression and the words they used to answer such an innocent question. Some of the kids caught on and figured they wouldn't tell me more than I already knew- so they would ask me questions back, "what do you mean?" "Oh, nothing just how was school?" We could go back and forth for a while- but the less informed kids might just start their whole defense and spill their guts.

The manager does not know what information has reached the master, and if he panics on hearing this question it will no doubt give the master a great deal of insight.

But this particular manager is too clever, like my son John, who learned pretty quickly to demur and not give me more than I already knew. Perhaps this manager has been caught before. Indeed, the master has probably used this same technique with his other servants. What is this I hear of you? The manager knows the game and refuses to play. He responds to this direct question with complete silence. After a few tense moments, the master realizes that he cannot extract any new information from the manager, but he already has enough reliable information to fire him. Accordingly, the master says "Give me an accounting of your management, you cannot be my manager any longer." He tells him "Give me the books" But he doesn't take the books- and having the books is power.

This steward is wrestling with what to do- he fears he is not strong enough to be a laborer and he isn't disabled so begging in that culture is out. And he uses his crafty brain to ensure his future. I think that is what Jesus is praising and what he commends to his disciples. Use your gifts, your brains, and plan for your future. Plan for your **eternal** future. The children of this age- are craftier than the children of the

light- the worldly are more astute at dealing with their own worldly generation than are the followers of the way...Jesus seems to be saying "Don't be naïve."

Jesus goes on to say that the man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted in great things and the man who is dishonest in little things is dishonest in great things. And, futher If you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? – meaning If you haven't been trustworthy with the wealth of the world who will trust you with the wealth that is real? ..... Eternal riches.

On the surface this is a parable of how you use your wealth, your money. But I think it is much deeper. How you use all of your gifts, your brain, your ability to navigate in the world. How you treat others. Are you trustworthy? If not navigating this world could be hard. Are you focused on worldly, dishonest wealth? Or are you using these gifts to advance the kingdom of God?

"No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Maybe wealth is not just about money- wealth is a worldly value- money is power here on Earth, but as Jesus says in Matthew 6:19 ""Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal." Wealth seems to be synonymous with worldly things. I think that can be different for different people...but whatever it is for you... you can't serve 2 masters.

At the jail, when I teach Bible Study, or when I am engaged in one on one counseling I often ask, "Who or What is on the altar of your life? No, really what are you worshiping?" At the jail my answers might be- drugs, of course, alcohol, a terrible ungodly relationship- or relationships.... Where are they spending their time and "wealth"?? And even here in this holy space, we might ask ourselves the same question. Who or what is on the altar of your life.? Your friends? Your hobbies? Food? . Does God get an hour on Sunday and a minute before dinner...but not much more focused time all week? Is your face book getting more time than your prayer book? In Matthew 12:30 Jesus says "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. " That means there is no lukewarm Christianity. You can't be- kinda Christian. You can't be a Sunday Morning Christian and keep Jesus at arm's length all week. . I am glad no one here is a Christmas and Easter Christian- It's September and you are here! But seriously, think about who or what is on the altar of your life? Is it money? Money is power- charge cards are power; wealth accumulation is power. Is it stuff? Is your best friend Amazon? What is on the altar of your life? Is it status? Sometimes it's family- and I think family is important- but if you elevate those relationships to be on the altar of your life you are hurting yourself and your family.

Jesus tells this puzzling parable of the shrewd manager to illustrate an important point. That we need to plan for our future, our eternal future. We need to be clever to enact our plan, and to make friends so that our friends might have an opportunity to find eternal life. Jesus warns that there is room on the altar of your life for only one master. Will you put God on the altar of your life, or will you be caught up in worldly treasure and serve that master? "No one can serve two masters; for you will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and the world." That about sums it up.