

September 18

A Little Bit of Faithfulness

Luke 16:1-13

The story of the unscrupulous steward is one of those difficult parables for us to understand. Even such a lover of scripture as John Calvin characterized this parable as "hard and far-fetched." The story strains credulity and jolts our ethical sensibilities. Would anyone congratulate the scoundrel who first mismanaged his employer's funds and then cheated him out of recovering legitimate debts? Is Jesus holding up such unscrupulous dealings as exemplary? It sure seems that way. Even when Luke wrote it down you can see he has problems with this parable because he adds all sorts of other statements about money, including you cannot serve two masters. Recently some scholars have suggested a different idea. Perhaps the human figures of steward and master in the parable do not represent God and God's people. Imagine, instead, that Jesus is making this ironic comparison: "Look at the scoundrels who spend their time and energy scheming to ensure their own comfort and security. If only my followers would be that shrewd, that creatively reckless, that single-minded in serving me!" In our current political climate that values wealth at all cost, it seems, this parable might have something to say to us. If we, the church, went about our faith with the same intensity as some hedge fund managers go after acquiring wealth, think about what we could do. But as interesting as those thoughts might be, I want to focus on verse ten: "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."

Fred Craddock, who was a renowned preacher and story teller, vividly catches the force of this parable when he writes: "Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with a queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a country commissioner, teach a class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat. 'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.'"

In light of those words I believe this parable is telling us to seize the opportunities God provides us. It likely won't be spectacular or dramatic. In fact it will probably be

such an ordinary task, such as what Craddock listed, like needing to write a note or feed the neighbor's cat, that we would not even see it as a ministry possibility. If we are not careful, we can miss these God given opportunities and end up failing to be faithful as we have been challenged to do. Think about those trying to create wealth. They check the stock market often, intently looking for anything that would signal that they should buy or sell. Because of this intensity of focus they rarely miss opportunities. Jesus was saying, learn from them. Focus on what God gives you to do and be faithful. What we are asked to do might not seem like much but being faithful in a little is also being faithful in much.

Think about what you were asked to do this week. How were these activities challenging you to be faithful? I will just replay a few incidents from my calendar of the past week. My brother had a birthday and I drove to Seattle to take him to lunch. I had two committee meetings that I sat in on. I practiced with the bell choir. Nothing really spectacular there. It would be easy to say that I didn't have any opportunities to be in service. Yet, my brother is glad when I take the time to celebrate with him. It was a huge time commitment to go to Seattle just for lunch but I am glad I did so. Committees, even though ably led, like my input. Choirs can only function well if their members show up. So, being faithful in these routine tasks is important, but even more, I need to continually remind myself that this is what God wants me to do this day. I need to see all of these as being a chance to be faithful and to embrace them with the same intensity as others embrace other activities.

Second, I see this reminder to be faithful in the little things is asking us to celebrate the opportunities we have instead of wishing for things we don't have. If you ask most people to give a list of ministry opportunities in a church, they will mention singing in the choir, leading a committee, working at a dinner or serving as a trustee. Perhaps, for a variety of reasons, none of these types of activities are things you can or want to do. It would be easy to feel like you are not really doing your part! You need to understand that the most important act of ministry that might happen in the name of the church this week is a small deed done by you. I rarely have people tell me how they were touched or supported by attending a meeting. They enjoy listening to the choirs

and it makes worship better, but touching them directly, not so much. What I hear about is the person who offered to take someone to the doctor, or stopped by for a visit, or invited them out to lunch. These are the ways people feel loved and cared about. These are the things I hear about as pastor when people celebrate our ministry.

I recall a person telling me that she had agreed to visit a woman in the nursing home. She had little family around and was quite lonely. She was in very poor health so everyone assumed it was a short time commitment. She was into her seventh year of weekly visits when I met her and she made it almost to a decade before the person died. If she was in town she visited because she had said yes so many years ago. In the beginning she had not seen this as a gift or ministry but over time as her relationship with this woman deepened she saw how she ministered and was ministered too.

So the question we need to answer every day is, "Are we going to be faithful doing what God has asked us to do instead of wishing that it was something bigger or splashier?"

The last thing this parable challenges us to do is probably the hardest, and that is to make sure we give God and our faith the attention they deserve. I tend to agree that the focus of this parable is on us being challenged to be as driven in our faithfulness as the unscrupulous manager was in making money and using money to make friends. I do not believe the master was God and that Jesus was commending the actions of the manager. It was that driven-ness that he applauded.

We see this in our day and age. There is the workaholic who spends 80 plus hours a week making money. We see the person who uses money to buy friends and influence politicians so that they can make more money. We know people where almost all of their energy is into not spending money. They rarely go out to eat, don't want to tip and all the rest because the numbers in the bank account are more important than any comforts that money might buy.

Bringing this down just a notch, think about how much time and energy the issue of money fills your life. You look at your savings and wonder if it will be enough. You get concerned when grocery prices go up. You debate whether you really need a new coat,

car, shoes, or will the ones you have be good enough. And so the list goes on. Now I am not saying there is anything wrong with this, but picture this. What if you spent as much time in deliberate faith related activities as you spend on money matters? What if you thought as much about what God would want you to do in your life as you thought about interest rates and inflation? My guess is that you don't do this. Jesus says change your focus. Have more intensity about faith.

And if money is not something that consumes your time think about how much intensity you put into pursuing hobbies or sports. Give God that same intensity. Too often we approach faith issues as something we have to do instead of wanting to do, or having them excite us. When you approach ministry options with the intensity Jesus was talking about earlier you are truly being faithful, even if it is a little thing.

Recently my good friend Tom passed away. Tom was music director for the Moscow First UMC for 27 years. He was passionate about his music. He put his heart and soul into it and was surprised when others did not share his intensity. I don't know how many conversations we had where he expressed frustration that people let other things take priority. He would tell his bell players, "When you miss practice there is an empty spot at the table. It isn't like a choir where others in the section can cover for you. You matter to the whole group, so show up." Because of that intensity some responded and as you heard a few years ago he got wonderful music from his ringers. But some didn't stay with him because it was just too much.

God calls us to bring some intensity to our faith. It doesn't have to be concerning big things, the little things matter just as much. We can learn from others in worldly pursuits what a faithful follower of Christ can look like. May we follow their example.