

Covenant Word

Shrewd Saints

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, I Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
September 23, 2007*

During the last week of June, I attended the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina as a part of my Sabbatical. Nestled in a valley of the Great Smokey Mountains, the School is dedicated to teaching skills that might not help you make a living, but they will help you in making a life. The idea is that as you learn, you will also live in community with others who are learning.

Some of the classes taught focused on weaving, quilting, jewelry making, woodcarving, coopering, blacksmithing, writing, basketry, painting, and playing the

harp and dulcimer. The class that I attended was on storytelling. Corinne Stavish was our teacher. A small, Jewish woman, she put us through our paces for six hours every day as we studied the origins of folk tales.

One of the stories that she had us read was entitled "Clever Manka." (Joanna Cole, Best-loved Folktales) It is a Czechoslovakian tale wherein two neighbors go to the local burgomaster to settle their dispute over a heifer. The burgomaster gives them a riddle to solve with the understanding that whoever can solve the riddle will receive the heifer over which they were arguing.

The riddle was a series of three questions: What is the swiftest thing in the world? What is the sweetest thing? And what is the richest?

The quarreling neighbors went home to ponder their answers. The richer of the two, a farmer, consulted with his wife. She cheered him greatly by telling

him that she knew the answers:

Why husband, our gray mare must be the swiftest thing in the entire world as no one ever passes it on the road. As for the sweetest, did you ever taste honey any sweeter than ours? And I am sure that there is nothing richer than our own chest of gold that we have been saving all these forty years.

When the other man, a shepherd, arrived home, his daughter, Manka, met him at the door. He explained that the burgomaster had sent him home with a riddle to solve. When Manka heard it, she too claimed to know the answer and entrusted it to her father.

The next morning, both men arrived at the burgomaster's house. The rich farmer gave his answers with pompous flourish. The burgomaster listened with disinterest. But when the shepherd began to speak, the burgomaster perked up. His answer was:

The swiftest thing in the world is a thought, for a thought can run any distance in a twinkling of an eye. The sweetest thing of all is sleep, for when a man is

tired and sad, what can be sweeter? And the richest thing is the earth, for out of the earth come all the riches of the world.

The burgomaster was so pleased

with this answer, that he awarded the heifer to the shepherd and then asked how he had come up with his answer. When he heard about the shepherd's daughter, Manka, the burgomaster asked to meet her. So clever did he find Manka that he married her. The only condition of their marriage was that she, Manka, must never interfere with any of his judgments or he would have to send her home.

All went well in their marriage for many years. But, sure enough, a dispute in the community arose and secretly, Manka gave advice. The burgomaster approached her. "I told you what would happen if you interfered in any of my cases. Home you go this very day. I don't care to hear any excuses. The matter is settled. You may, however, take with you the one thing you like best in my house, for I won't have people saying that I treated you shabbily."

With the risk of loosing everything, Manka did not cry. Instead she set about making her husband's favorite meal so that they could celebrate the many happy years they had had together. The supper was

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



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so good that the burgomaster ate and ate and ate. And the more he ate, the more he drank...until he fell sound asleep. When he awoke the next morning, he found himself in the shepherd's cottage. "What does this mean?" he roared.

"Nothing, dear husband, nothing!" Manka said. "You told me I might take with me the one thing I liked best in your house, so of course, I took you! That's all!"

And with laughter in their hearts, the burgomaster and Manka went back home to live happily ever after. Oh, and when a difficult case came up from that point on, he always said: "I think we had better consult my wife. You know, she is a very clever woman!"

Clever...keen...farsighted...astute...cunning...wily...artful...sharp...shrewd. These are characteristics that we often associate with personalities like Martha Stewart, The Enron Corporation, Richard Scrushy, Brittany Spears and O.J. Simpson. We find ourselves grateful that we are not pleading a deal, bargaining for freedom or scrambling for survival. However, in our gospel reading for today, it is the dishonest steward who is praised for this type of shrewdness. We do not normally associate the good news of the gospel with such cunning and underhanded behavior. But, in the telling of this parable, Jesus raises for our consideration the example of a servant who embezzles from his master. He even goes so far as to suggest that in this shrewd man's actions, there is a certain kind of model for the godly life. (William Willimon, "A Metaphorical Life," [Pulpit Resource](#), Sept. 23, 1007) It is a parable that has stumped commentators for centuries. Let's look at this story and attempt some truth for ourselves.

The context of this story's telling is given in the previous chapter when the Pharisees are expressing concern that Jesus is condoning sin by keeping the company of sinners around the dinner table. Jesus then tells 4 stories in rapid succession: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son and our text for today, the steward in danger of losing everything. In each of the previous stories, God is too busy rejoicing over finding each one that was lost to be concerned about what they did in order to be lost in the first place. This extravagant love of God both fulfills and violates our human sense of what is right and fair. But it is this same joy that characterizes the landowner's praise of the shrewd steward, for the steward acts with decisive quickness in order to save himself. It causes us to wonder: What would we do if we were found out, covered with accusation and faced with devastating loss? What would we do if we were in danger of losing everything forever?

Now a steward, in the time of Jesus, was a person with exceptionally large responsibilities. (Malcolm Tolbert, [The Broadman Commentary](#), "Luke") The steward of our story was in charge of his master's property and, apparently, word reached

the master that the steward was stealing from him. The master acts quickly. He calls the steward in, fires him on the spot, and asks for an audit of the books.

On his way to get the books, however, the steward realizes that he lives in such a time and place that the news of his dismissal would circulate quickly and, in addition to losing his job, he would lose his reputation, creating such severe difficulties in securing a job that he feared he would be left begging at the city's gate.

Realizing the desperate situation in which he would soon find himself, he devises a shrewd plan. He falls back on his skills of deception and decides that the best course of action is to use the only resource still available to him. He will bilk his employer one more time and thus, endear himself to the debtors in hopes that they will remember his kindness when he is looking for a job. So before his dismissal became community knowledge, he calls in each of his master's debtors. He has each one of them change their bill of debt so that what was owed the master is dramatically reduced.

We realize how ingenious the plan is when the master is later faced with the done deed. The community is already celebrating the master's generosity even before he knew what had been done. Now if he were to tell the debtors that it was all a mistake and make them revert to their original debt, he would be perceived as mean and stingy. But if he accepted what the steward has done, then he would be seen as gracious and generous in the eyes of the community. And in a Middle Eastern culture that is obsessed with honor and the avoidance of shame, what was it to lose a little money in the process if it gained you notoriety? ...And the steward? He would gain friends for future business contacts.

Weighing his options, instead of doling out judgment, the master chose to praise the steward for his shrewdness, saying "for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ...He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." (16:8, 10) The parable suggests that the followers of Christ, or "the children of light," have a lot to learn from the secular world about their commitment to do whatever it takes in order to be people of faith that are determined to advance the kingdom of God. The praise of the owner for the steward's shrewdness conveys a wild abandonment of anything that stands in our way or keeps us from doing what God asks. It is stepping out on the proverbial limb of faith. It is rushing forward to do what needs to be done; or scrambling to act in love even in the face of danger. Jesus tells us the life of a believer is to be this daring. At other junctures, he puts it this way:

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart,

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and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)

Our tendency, as children of light, however, is to play it safe. We act prudently and thus, we are often less courageous. We act according to the restraints of the law, common decency, honor and integrity. We like to stay within the church budget and often hide behind thoughts like “we must be cautious because this is not our money,” or “there just isn’t money in the budget with which to be extravagant.” We do not like to spend what we do not have, and so our creativity is stymied by the realism of what is recorded on the bank statement.

The gospel’s lesson seems to be teaching us something dramatically different. It is an unreasonable, unsafe, contradictory lesson. It is a lesson about commitment that never reads the bank statement or worries about writing a check when there is no money in the bank to cover it. Like the embezzling manager who drops everything, even his love of money, and scrambles to save his skin; like the criminal who will say anything in order to get out of trouble; sometimes the church needs to re-discover its sense of abandonment in order to follow Jesus’ leading in how to love one another without literally calculating the cost. (Willimon)

While I cannot speak for the leadership of this church, I suspect I am accurate in including them and many you in my own sense of anxiety about raising money not only for an increased annual budget, but for a capitol stewardship campaign as well. I look at the projected numbers and wonder how can a congregation of our size take such bold leaps?

That is when the challenge of today’s lesson speaks to me. While I would never encourage dishonest or irresponsible action, I do wonder about the challenge to be so faithful that we are shrewd, in other words, that we are so faithful to what we believe and know to be God’s active ministry in this place that we act daringly in order to secure the future for holy purposes.

So for instance, **being a shrewd saint** might mean that we would wholeheartedly support a budget that includes programming that meets the needs of young families when we are retired or childless or enjoying our empty nest.

Being a shrewd saint might mean that we would delight in a budget for ministries to the hungry, dirty, uneducated, down and out when we work every day to conscientiously provide for ourselves and those within our care.

Being a shrewd saint might mean that we give happily to a budget that pay a conscientious staff when we may be filled with anxiety over the possibilities that new staff will bring.

Being a shrewd saint might mean that you are filled with joy with the prospect that by paying to keep the lights and air conditioning on, some disenfranchised soul may wander into our doors and find more than sanctuary. They find a family of faith that welcomes them home.

The reality of this parable is that we should be asking

ourselves: if we were in danger of loosing Baptist Church of the Covenant forever, what would we be willing to do in order to secure its continuance? ...and whatever answer we come up with is the very same answer we use to guide us in our response to the annual budget and capital stewardship campaign.

They say that parables are snapshots of the Kingdom of God. I take great comfort, therefore, in seeing that God is like this master who, though expecting honesty, had arms open wide enough to welcome a shrewd scoundrel with grace. Perhaps, then, there will be grace enough to receive me, and you, as shrewd saints who risk everything in order to have a place at the table of sinners within the company of Christ.

There is another story taken from Jewish folklore where a rabbi was put in the position of deciding the fate of his people forever. A conquering ruler brought the rabbi to stand before the Jews, and told the rabbi that their fate was in his hands. He, the conqueror, was taking two

slips of paper. On one he would place a dot. The other would remain blank. Both would be placed in a box and the rabbi would be asked to reach in and choose one. If he chose the paper without any marks on it, the Jews would be spared and set free. If, however, he chose the slip with the dot on it, the Jews would be annihilated.

Standing next to the conqueror, the rabbi was aghast to see what the crowd could not. The conqueror put dots on each slip of paper before he dropped them in the box. It appeared as if the Jews were doomed. The rabbi, however, faced with the possibility that all would be lost, came up with a shrewd idea. He reached into the box, pulled out a piece of paper and immediately put it into his mouth, chewed it up and swallowed it. “Why did you do that?” roared the conqueror.

“Oh, I was just so hungry, I could not help myself. But since you only marked one piece of paper, whatever we find in the box, we will know that I chose the other one!” And so, because of his shrewdness, the Jews were saved! (Told by Corinne Stavish at the John C. Campbell Folk School)

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