

Karen Hollis
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Luke 16:1-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be reflections of your word to us in Christ Jesus.
Um

Upon reading this story through the first time I put down my Bible and said, "what?" And the initial response of all the commentators I read was, "huh?" This may be one of the most confusing stories in scripture, but this is one that I think is made a bit clearer in *The Message* translation, so here is the passage for you again:

From *The Message*:

Jesus said to his disciples, "There was once a rich man who had a manager. He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses. So he called him in and said, 'What's this I hear about you? You're fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.'

"The manager said to himself, 'What am I going to do? I've lost my job as manager. I'm not strong enough for a labouring job, and I'm too proud to beg. . . . Ah, I've got a plan. Here's what I'll do . . . then when I'm turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses.'

"Then he went at it. One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master. He said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' "He replied, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.'

"The manager said, 'Here, take your bill, sit down here—quick now—write fifty.'

"To the next, he said, 'And you, what do you owe?' "He answered, 'A hundred sacks of wheat.' "He said, 'Take your bill, write in eighty.'

"Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behaviour."

What is most apparent from the text is that the manager is scrappy; he's a survivor and does what he needs to do to get by, even if it isn't done with the utmost integrity. In his current position, it seems he hasn't been managing well and has been exploiting his position for his own benefit.

To make heads or tails of this story, it's helpful to know that in Jesus' day, it is illegal for Jews to lend money at interest, but many skirt around this by lending in kind with things like oil and wheat. NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 193.

It is logical then that the manager, knowing there is additional interest on the loans, has what he considers a brilliant idea! One of the ways he can clean up his situation is to deduct the interest from what debtors owe the estate. Either the manager himself charged this interest . . . which would endear him to the community by righting what he had wronged. Or, it was the master who charged the interest and the manager is calling out the corruption of power. The master can't really protest the manager's actions without owning up to his own misconduct.

All the characters in this story are part of a system, and so they are affected particularly by the decisions and actions of those with influence and power. Every action in the story has an impact on the whole. The manager's lack of managing has an impact on the master's ability to make money. The manager is finding ways of making do in life through his job, but without that, he looks to the community to help him (even when the community itself has little to give). The debtors are first exploited, then experience some restitution and perhaps in time, reconciliation. Within the system, there isn't a way to magically get ahead, because all of the resources are finite. When you finesse your way into a little more, it takes a little away elsewhere. While nothing is free . . . everything is in relationship.

This idea drew me to the work of Rev. Eric Law, whose books I consumed in seminary and who is a good friend of our own Linda St. Clair. Eric was even here for a visit over the summer. He writes and speaks extensively on what he calls Holy Currency Exchange. It is the foundation of missional ministries – these are ministries that take their faith out into the world – that are sustainable. Eric says, "The shift from being task-oriented to being relationship-oriented often serves as the first step for [people] to get a real sense of what it means to be missional . . . [it] invites church leaders to rethink how they invest their currencies of time, place, and money. Do they exchange these currencies for doing something for others or do they exchange them for building up their currencies of relationship?" Eric Law, *Holy Currency Exchange*, 31.

What happens to a system when the energy and currencies are not held tight . . . what happens when they are not just shared respectfully, but are actually used to build relationships? How would that change the relationship between the master and manager? Would the shrewd manager feel the kind of support he needs in life? How would that effect the wider community? It's really all about stewardship of resources, of these holy currencies, and the priorities that motivate their use. Priorities that tear down or build up.

[My brother in law owns 3 restaurants and one day Daniel walked into one of them and asked for a job. He didn't have a place to live, had been struggling with substance abuse, and he was trying to get his life together. So, Jonathan hired him to deliver food orders. Over time they built currency in their relationship and trust. Jonathan said, it wasn't always easy; "some days he wanted to quit and other days, we wanted to fire him," but they got through it. They trusted Daniel with more and more and watched him succeed until finally, Jonathan made him manager of one of the restaurants. The job gave him income, but dignity, self-respect, self-confidence, and hope. But the job was an opportunity to build that relationship that helped Daniel grow as a person. Now as the restaurant manager, Daniel can pay it forward to people who are experiencing the same kind of life struggles he once was.] Using the exchange to build currency of relationship.

It's pretty exciting to me when I then think about our own congregation and the relationships we already have. Susan's report this morning shows us our considerable reach into the community . . . and these are only the connections we recorded. I wonder about the holy currencies we already exchange . . . think about your own relationship with the wider Gabriola community, and the things you offer. Maybe you offer things that fit into the categories of time, offering spaces, leadership, truth, wellness, money. Law 167

What are the blessings cultivated by these offerings? How do these offerings foster relationship? Do they offer as much energy as they require? How might you build on them? How might the blessing they offer grow?

We all have our individual relationships with the community . . . the congregation has its own relationship with the community and makes its own offerings to the community . . . though I admit the line is pretty fuzzy. There are already missional elements to our ministries. We begin this visioning process with so much and so much potential. I really do wonder what call looks like for us. Is it a synthesis of our individual calls from God? Or does God have a ministry in mind that we never would have considered, but illuminates the intersection between our congregational identity & ability and the needs of the world? Fredrick Buechner

A ministry that builds the currency of relationship.

In God's kingdom, where our hands and hearts are attuned to the well being of all, what were once finite resources, become the seeds, the fertilizer, the sun and rain, the energy and heart, which all work together to create this beautiful abundance that feeds everyone and cultivates joy. What an opportunity we have to be intentional . . . to build on our connections and relationships . . . to build a sustainable ministry in our own community. May it grow and bear fruit, fruit that lasts . . . and may it bless the world.