

“Being a Wise Steward” by Jacqie Wallen

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The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

I am a member of the Learners and Teachers Mission Group. Members of this Mission Group traditionally offer sermons during recommittment season, the time leading up to Recommittment Sunday. During this time, we Seekers are all asked to review our commitment to God and to Seekers Church. Some key questions that we are advised to ask ourselves are:

- What am I being called to offer to God and God's creation?
- How can being a part of Seekers Church support my response to God's call?
- What do I need from and through this community in order to deepen my commitment to Christ?

When Learners and Teachers divided among ourselves the available dates for preaching, I ended up with what is arguably the most difficult to understand of Jesus's parables

– The Shrewd Manager, The Dishonest Steward, or The Unjust Steward, as it is variously called. I tried to switch to a different date but the other dates were all taken. I was stuck with it. In this parable, a rich man seems to be praising an employee who he has fired for mismanaging his accounts. He praises the manager even though the manager has shortchanged him by collecting reduced amounts from the rich man's debtors in order to ensure their good will in the future. The rich man says: "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."

What??

And then it gets even more confusing. After telling the story in which the rich man praises the manager for being dishonest to protect his own future well-being, Jesus says: "If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"

If that is true, why would Jesus tell a story in which a rich man praises a dishonest Steward? Why would he hold this man up as a model to his followers? Is he saying that dishonest business practices are good if they benefit you? It certainly supports Max Weber's view of the connection between Protestantism and capitalism! And it is a philosophy well-represented in business and politics today.

A number of explanations for this mystifying parable have been offered by scholars:

- Perhaps the owner was taken with the cleverness of the steward's solution. Even though he was dishonest, he was a good businessman.
- Or is Jesus saying that even though the manager wisely promoted his own well-being on earth, he will not go to

heaven?

- Perhaps, like the story of the Prodigal Son, which it follows, it is intended to demonstrate that love is more important than justice. The Prodigal Son squandered his father's fortune but was forgiven.
- In fact, some say, it is about forgiveness, or "radical forgiveness." The manager was Christ-like in forgiving people their debts.
- Others say it shows that even the wicked can engage in positive behaviors
- Another explanation is that it shows that wealth is of fleeting value, but love and generosity are eternal.
- Along the same lines, some scholars distinguish between our human economy, which has to do with wages and profits, and "God's economy," which has to do with social welfare. In God's economy, great debts are forgiven easily.
- Some say the parable is designed to shake up our thinking, sort of like a Zen koan—you know, like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" It opens us up to new paradigms.
- Another interpretation is that Jesus is being his holy fool self and the story is sarcastic. The friends he makes may not judge the manager, but God will.
- Maybe the manager has been overcharging debtors all along and this is his attempt to make things right.
- My favorite interpretation is that there is a key mistranslation in the parable. In Greek, the same word can mean either blessing or curse. While it meant curse in the original Greek, it has accidentally been translated into other languages as "blessing." In the original Greek, both the rich man and Jesus reacted negatively to the manager's scheme to provide for his future wellbeing.

I also like the interpretation of a Canadian pastor who calls himself "Pastor Paul." Pastor Paul says:

Upon closer inspection, the point of this parable seems to be that a wise person understands that their season of strength, opportunity and wealth is fleeting. Sooner or later we all run out of vitality, our prospects dim and our wealth deserts us. Every person fades and eventually fails, but the wise (person) thinks about the future and orchestrates a plan.
<https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/jesus-command-dishonest-manager/>

Whether or not this interpretation is correct, I like it. I like it because it relates to what I feel to be my call at Seekers at the present time. I'd like to answer the recommitment questions that I read earlier as far as my own recommitment is concerned.

1. What am I being called to offer to God and God's creation?

I feel that, at the present time in my life, I am being called by God to be what I am—an old woman—a crone. The crone is the old wise woman who sits at the door between life and death, offering comfort to those approaching the threshold. I have painted a picture of the crone as she appears in one of my Day of the Dead photographs. In the picture, her eyes are penetrating and she seems to see us (and herself) as we really are. On her shoulder sits her familiar, the owl. Like the crone, the owl has been both venerated and feared and is also associated with birth, death, and vision or second sight. Unlike the crone, who looks straight at us, the owl looks off into the distance, perhaps seeing things to come. Both archetypes are associated with darkness and the night and both represent spirituality. The crone's season is late fall and winter, a time of coldness and the dying light but also a time of faith and hope. Her element is metal which, in traditional acupuncture represents grief, letting go, and wisdom.

Over the past year, I have felt a strong call to help Seekers

members plan ahead for their later years and the later years of their friends and family members. The seed for this call was planted when I began teaching a course at the University of Maryland called "Aging and the Family." In preparing and teaching this course I learned a lot more about the aging process, family dynamics surrounding aging, and resources for maintaining a high quality of life in one's later years. This led me, when I retired from the University of Maryland, to focus my private practice of psychotherapy on adults in midlife or older. Because of my clinical work, I continue to learn more about later life issues and resources for older adults.

My sense of call at Seekers has been shaped by this background. I am one of the founding members of Down the Road, which is a new Seekers ministry led by me, John Morris, Peter Bankson, and Okima Bryant. Its purpose is to support and inform Seekers as they plan ahead for their future personal, spiritual, housing, health, legal, financial, and social needs. This initiative emerged from a series of meetings in which Seekers shared their visions and concerns about their own aging or the aging of older friends and family members.

While our ministry is still in the process of defining its role, some activities are already well-established. We began a website in 2018 to provide a forum for Seekers to share information, ideas, resources, plans, and feelings about the later years and the aging process. The website is open to all, except for the Seekers Chat Room, which is for Seekers only.

Another well-established component of the Down the Road ministry is its partnership with Learners and Teachers. Last year, Learners and Teachers convened focus groups to learn what aging resources Seekers felt they would need in the future. These meetings were very productive and led to the creation of the website, Down the Road. Some of the many topics that came up were:

- Downsizing
- Moving closer to Seekers to create a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC)
- Affordable housing
- Multigenerational housing
- Spiritual inspiration and support
- Sharing resources and information
- Living wills
- Health and fitness
- Legal advice
- Telling our stories
- Social support
- “Elder-proofing”
- Financial and health insurance planning
- Estate planning
- Intergenerational activities

Learners and Teachers is responding to this list in designing courses. This semester we are already offering a course on telling our stories.

Death is somewhat of a taboo topic in our society but it's something we need to talk about. Many cultures are more open about death than we are. Last October, I displayed pictures of a Day of the Dead celebration in Oaxaca, Mexico in the Seekers Gallery. During these celebrations, skeletons are depicted with affection and humor—they are not the scary figures that we decorate with on Halloween. The Seekers children built a Day of the Dead altar in Sunday School for the Day of the Dead. On October 26th of this year, the Down the Road/Learners and Teachers partnership will be offering a Death Café. A Death Café is a safe place to gather, eat cake, drink tea, and share our thoughts about death. There is no agenda for a Death Café, but Marjory Bankson will facilitate to help the sharing go smoothly.

Members of the Down the Road ministry will be meeting soon to discuss next steps. The discussion will include planning for

another Seekers focus group to assess our progress so far and brainstorm ideas for the future.

2. How can being a part of Seekers Church support my response to God's call?

I have been a member of Seekers for about 16 years now (making me a short-timer in comparison to a lot of other Seekers). During that time, Seekers, especially my Mission Group, have been invaluable in affirming my contributions and supporting my spiritual growth. Being a part of a loving community that encourages creativity and initiative has allowed me to become useful in a way that draws on my best abilities. The process of writing weekly spiritual reports and meditating on the comments I receive has been like psychotherapy for my spirit, enhancing my spiritual health and helping me discern my call. I hope that I will be able to rely on Seekers for these wonderful gifts in the coming year.

3. What do I need from and through this community in order to deepen my commitment to Christ?

I need Seekers to avail themselves of what Down the Road is offering. Use the website, participate in the chat room, take the classes, attend the Death Café. What I need is another year of what I have been getting all along. The opportunity to be a part of and be useful and valued by a loving, thoughtful, generous community. It is our way of being the body of Christ in this world.