**Shrewd Living for the Kingdom of God**, a sermon in response to Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 and Luke 16:1-13 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton on September 22, 2019.

This week I had a chance to see about half of the movie “The Untouchables,” with Kevin Costner as Eliot Ness, Robert De Niro as Al Capone, and Sean Connery as Jim Malone. I’ve seen it several times before, but it had been a while. Eliot Ness is a clean-cut, **strictly by-the-book** federal officer, who had been given the task of bringing down the mobster Al Capone. He has already tried to raid some of Capone’s illegal liquor storage – but some corrupt policemen had tipped Capone off. The problem is that Ness sees everything in black-and-white… right or wrong… good or evil… He’s a bit of a square. And, he’s only willing to act within the narrow guidelines of the law. But – he is quickly learning that’s not the way things work in Chicago. +++ Now, Ness is putting his new team together when he has a chance meeting with a street-smart veteran officer – Jim Malone…, And Malone – Sean Connery – in one of my favorite movie lines of all time, tells him what it’s going to take to bring down Capone:: “What are ***you*** prepared to do? … If you open the ball on these people, Mr. Ness, you must be prepared to go all the way… You want to get Capone? Here’s how you get him: He pulls a ***knife***; you pull a ***gun***. He sends one of yours to the ***hospital***, you send one of his to the ***morgue***. ***That’s*** the Chicago way!... And that’s how you get Capone.” +++ +++ And sure enough, as Ness becomes less predictable – more shrewd – less constrained by the rules – more violent… – … he catches up with Capone. And eventually puts him behind bars. +++ To achieve his **righteous** goal – Eliot Ness had to use the tools of ***this*** world – he had to be clever – and operate in shades of grey instead of black and white.

Now, don’t get me wrong… I’m not advocating violence or breaking the law, but it’s somehow refreshing to see the hero get creative – to use everything at his disposal to get the job done. Otherwise, good guys can be so boring and naïve… +++ … especially any character that identifies as **Christian** – so often, they one-dimensional, unimaginative, and they often lack courage when faced with real-world problems. It seems writers don’t know what to do with Christians – maybe because, collectively, we don’t get out there and engage enough **as self-identified Christians** in the tough, ambiguous, complex, challenges of our time. Christian characters might try hard and they might really care – but they usually don’t know how to get things done – or they are overly judgmental. They can’t engage in the real world or make tough choices. +++ +++ Last week I said we life in a time when “any remaining sense of community – of mutual responsibility – of decency… -often seems outdated… – or quaint… – or naïve.” Is that what it takes to be a Christian – to be ***“quaint”***? … Is that who **Christ** calls us to be? …Is that the **example** he set for us? +++ **NO!** +++ Of course not! +++ **Jesus Christ** argued with religious and political leaders, knowing how to turn their own words against them… **Jesus** rescued victims of violence from vigilantes, he spoke before thousands of people with a deep understanding of their suffering, he physically challenged the moneychangers in the temple – overturning their tables and driving them out. **Christ** knew the Hebrew scriptures inside and out – and interpreted its relevance to the people of his own time. He carefully prepared his disciples to continue his work after his departure, warning them of the hatred they would face. +++ And then, he positioned the religious leaders so they would no choice but to have him crucified – knowing full well what that would mean for our salvation – and for history. +++ ***Quaint? Naïve?*** N!! – Jesus Christ is the epitome of cunning intelligence – of **Shrewd Living for the Kingdom of God**. +++ Now, it’s our turn to learn what Eliot Ness learned – to dig ***deeply*** into this world – be a ***part*** of it – learn how to make things ***happen*** – and then **use** your values to make a difference. This world **needs** the people of the Church to be fully engaged with everything outside these four walls – at the town square, in business, in education, in public service – everywhere. If we are truly to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world, we have to function IN the world, in service to Christ… We have to be able to evaluate all our hard work – our busyness… And ask… Are we investing our engagement in the world to the greatest advantage in the service of Christ. *Are OUR efforts focused in the right places?*

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

I think this is what Christ is talking about in today’s very challenging parable. Leading up to this passage, Jesus **has been teaching what *discipleship*** is all about. Just two chapters ago, we learned the importance of focusing on God beyond everything else in life, including our own families – and he challenged the social conventions of the day, telling us to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to our table – instead of people who could return the favor back to us. Then, just before today’s lesson, Jesus describes the Lord’s extravagant compassion – bringing home the one lost sheep – searching for the one lost coin – and rejoicing in the return of the prodigal son. This **compassion**, he teaches time and time again, should be a model for us as his disciples. ***Compassion where WE should be focused****.*

++++++++++++

Now,… **today’s** passage connects all the others together, the **real-world *challenges*** of discipleship, social customs, and compassion…. We meet a manager who has squandered his master’s property and is about to be fired. He knows this means he is faced with homelessness and shame. So, he figures out a shrewd plan to save himself …. Until he is actually fired, he still has authority to act on his master’s behalf. So, he uses his last days as manager to reduce the amount his master’s debtors owe to him. This will make them want to help the manager later when he needs a place to live. But it’s going to cost his master a fortune.

It’s surprising to us when the Master finds out what he has done. Even though he had just lost a lot of money, he actually commends the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. He used tools of the world – wealth, power, and social status – to ensure that his OWN worldly needs were met. ***Good job!*** +++ It spins our head, doesn’t it – ***at least it should!*** +++ ***All* these people** – the master, the manager, the debtors – they are all working in a closed,… inwardly focused,… system… that measures ***success*** – that judges between **good and bad/ between right and wrong** – based solely on outcomes of **this** world: financial security – a house to live in. Jesus calls them the **children of their age**.

+++++++

But Christ calls **us** to something different than that, doesn’t he? He calls us to ***function*** in that world – to ***understand*** it – to be a ***part*** of it – in fact, ***to be good at it***… … **but then, to be *more***. +++ +++ And ***that’s*** where OUR challenge from this passage comes in. +++ Jesus complains, **“The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”** This manager knew what to do – how to use the tools he had to achieve his selfish financial objectives. +++ He understood **his** world. **+++ Christ’s question is whether WE, the “children of light” understand OUR world in the Lord – whether *we* understand the Kingdom of God.** Do you bring the same creativity,… energy,… and focus to your life as a disciple as you do to your life as a manager, employee, parent, or family member? +++ Are ***you*** as creative – as dedicated day in and day out – to the Kingdom of God as the children of this age are to ***their*** own agendas? +++ Earlier in this section of Luke, Christ teaches, “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.” … Where is ***your*** treasure? As the children of light? Do we reflect God’s kingdom by… ++ welcoming the outcast who could never pay us back, ++ by feeding the hungry, ++ sheltering the homeless? ++ Do we wrestle with our age – dedicating ourselves to social justice +++ healing our planet ++ breaking down artificial social boundaries that only separate us and cause pain? Can YOU be as shrewd as this manager, Jesus asks, in achieving ***GOD’S*** objectives of **love** and **compassion?** **And what tools have you developed to do so?**

++++++++ +++++++ +++++++++

This brings us to the most challenging verse in the passage. In the New Revised Standard Version, it reads – “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.”… *“by means of* ***dishonest*** *wealth…”* Does Christ want us to use “DISHONEST WEALTH???” He is NOT telling us here to **be** dishonest and then use our ill-gotten gains for good. I think a better translation than “*dishonest* wealth” is “*unrighteous* wealth” – it’s from the Greek *a-di-KAY-as* (which means “*unrighteous*”). So, literally it manes “Unrighteous wealth.” +++ In the New Testament we often see this word for “unrighteous” used to mean things of *this* world – as opposed to being *of Christ* – of the Kingdom of God. – In other words, I think Christ is telling us here to use our resources of *THIS* world – our time, tools, money, and relationships of *THIS* world ***shrewdly*** to achieve the *goals* of the **Kingdom of God**.

As the passage closes with the warning that “you cannot serve God and wealth,” the problem is not with wealth itself. It’s not about the tools we are given to function in this world – it’s about what we use them for. As the children of light – are WE shrewd enough to know what to do with the worldly tools that are entrusted to us? Will we serve God or ourselves? *Will we give the right kind of effort* ***AND*** *focus it in the right place?*

+++++++++++++++++

In our Old Testament lesson today, Jeremiah asks the same question. After receiving the Promised Land as a free gift from God, Israel has turned its back on the Lord. They had been given so many resources – so much *worldly* wealth – so many opportunities – to serve God and follow the law. But they had failed to do so time after time and Jeremiah sees no hope for redemption. “***Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?***” Physicians – doctors – use shrewd wisdom and skill to heal their patients – but Jeremiah found no such person in Israel who could step forward and change things – no one shrewd enough to save them from themselves.

++++++++++++++++++

But we know there IS a balm in Gilead – something ancient Israel did not have – and that is the life and witness of Jesus Christ – teaching us **how** to ***live shrewdly for the kingdom of God*** – giving us an example of the kind of life to lead. +++ As the ***children of light*** in today’s world,… the Church must follow his example. +++ Beyond the inward focus of the manager, his master, and the debtors, **we** must care for each other as sisters and brothers in Christ – AND we must have an **outward** focus that goes beyond these four walls – an outward focus that uses the tools of *this world* shrewdly ***in his name*** – an outward focus that *really* understands the needs of a particular community,… a particular state,… a particular nation,… ***this*** particular world at ***this*** particular moment,… and attend to them with wisdom, with skill, and with courage.

In his book *Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened to the Good News?*, Philip Yancey writes, “***We***,, Jesus’ followers, are the agents assigned to carry out God’s will on earth. Too easily we expect God to do something ***for*** us when instead God wants to do it ***through*** us.” +++ *[[REPEAT]]* “***We***,, Jesus’ followers, are the agents assigned to carry out God’s will on earth. Too easily we expect God to do something ***for*** us when instead God wants to do it ***through*** us.”

+++++++++++

THE GOOD NEWS is that Christ calls **YOU** – and **trusts** you – to be his hands and feet – to be the embodiment of Christ’s continuing work in the world. To do so, you must wisely … ***shrewdly***… use everything available to youu in this world – every interaction – every dollar – every moment – in ways that honor and serve him. +++ Otherwise, we truly do lack courage, we truly are quaint, and disengaged – just how Christians are so often depicted in media… In those famous words of Jim Malone: As the children of light… “What are ***you*** prepared to do?”

+++++++++============++++++++++++

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.