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September 22, 2019 – 15 Pentecost

St. Luke's, Hollister

Amos 8:4-7 God will remember the dishonest deeds of those who abuse the needy.

1 Tim 2:1-7 Pray for everyone, leading to a life of godliness and dignity.

Luke 16:1-13 The parable of the shrewd manager.

The story in today's Gospel reading is called the Parable of the Shrewd Manager. It is considered one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand, because there are so many different ways it can be interpreted. Why was it okay for the manager to cheat his master by settling the debts for smaller amounts? Was Jesus recommending that we act like the manager? Is Jesus charging us to use whatever means we need to, to justify the end of bringing people to God?

The master got a report that his manager was mismanaging his funds. A major focus in Jewish culture was honor and shame; even above making a profit. The master's honor and even his status in the community would be damaged if the public found out that he couldn't keep his own employee under control.

The manager had a real problem. If word got out that he brought dishonor to his master, his chances were very slim of ever getting another job as a manager. So he came up with the plan to protect his master's honor and to save his own reputation.

He forgave a big part of whatever was owed. People would assume that the manager was acting on behalf of the master, so it would make the master look generous. The honor that the master got through this action would be a lot more important than any monetary loss he would experience.

In fact, there might not have been any monetary loss for the master. Some bible scholars believe that the 'discount' the manager gave each debtor was only the commission he had added onto the actual debt. It was against OT law (Deut 23: 19,20) for Jews to charge each other "interest". So instead, they used the practice of charging a fee on top of the loan amount; 50-100% was not unusual. The steward might have just deducted his "commission", in which case the master would still receive his full amount.

The master praised the steward for what he had done, since the result was that the master's honor was protected. Pretty smart, wasn't he?

Jesus said, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." Jesus' story warns us to be careful about the standards we live our daily lives by; even over the little things we do. The little things count; they matter to God; they make a difference;

and they reflect where our heart is. Let me give you an example of paying attention to little things:

>>For ten years after Ruth's radiation therapy for cancer, Ruth went in for follow up x-rays. Think about the anxiety of doing that. After having a set of x-rays taken, you wait and wait for doctors to give you an 'all clear', or if they need to take more pictures, or against all wishes and prayers, doctors might say that the results are questionable or "of concern", and they want a biopsy taken. Our daughter Laurie went with Ruth for one of these exams. At first the room was full of nervous patients; one by one they were consulted with, and left, leaving Laurie with Ruth, and one woman (let's call her Sophie), who sat by herself in a corner, talking to no one, waiting. Laurie saw her alone, and felt moved to strike up a conversation with her. They shared comments about 'the waiting'; then Ruth felt moved to give her an angel coin. Sophie opened herself up to Laurie and Ruth. She told them about having surgery for cancer three years earlier; and then radiation. In the radiation treatment room there are large metal frames and panels that hold the x-ray machine. As she laid there alone for her treatments, as everybody else left the room, she saw the shape of an angel in the angular metal sheets and the shadows. Her angel brought her the comfort she needed. Over the next few years she filled her home with paintings and statues of angels. Her husband had passed away just a few months earlier, and her angels helped her make it through all of it. Now she was waiting to hear about the questionable x-rays that had been taken a few weeks before, and now she had an angel she could carry with her.

Sophie waited for the doctors, who finally let her know that her follow up x-rays looked fine. She gave Laurie and Ruth a huge hug, as though they were family, and then she left. Paying attention to what was happening in that waiting room changed Sophie's day – and maybe it changed her life: somebody cared what she was going through. Every one of us has these chances to make a small difference.

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>>Ruth's Kale salad for Carolyn...One of the friendships Ruth has made in Hollister is with a woman whose father is old and getting frail. He recently fell a few times, and the last time was so badly bruised up that he had to go to the hospital. Doctors said he needed to not go home, but to assisted living. The father is not handling that idea well at all. Ruth's friend is driving two hours each way to see her father, and to find an acceptable assisted living facility. Two days ago Ruth knew her friend would be home late. She took her a kale salad for dinner. Ruth has gotten three text message so far, to tell her how nice that was; how thoughtful; how

deeply appreciated. I don't think it was about love of kale salad. It was about doing something small to say that Ruth saw what was happening, she cared, and was thinking about her. Little things count more than big things, sometimes.

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>>How many of you were here for the Loma Prieta earthquake? Lots of areas lost power; traffic lights didn't work; some stores were closed; some couldn't use their cash registers. You couldn't make a cell phone call for days. But there was a caring that people showed for each other that was absolutely amazing. No one lost their patience; people who didn't know you asked how you were doing – and meant it; people were in no hurry to get through the intersections without lights, and would wave you through. We in San Jose would not stop in underpasses, but nobody honked at you for not moving up in line. There was a short time that everybody noticed the little things and celebrated them. I never want to experience another 7.1 earthquake, but I will never forget the caring.

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Paying attention to the little things matters; they have the power to change lives. They reveal where our heart is. We need to remember the power of a kind word, giving a warm smile, offering a prayer, even when we're tired, even when we're worried about our own lives, even when we don't feel like it. The little things matter.

Please take time this week to think about little things you have done that had surprisingly big results. Celebrate the impact they had. Then consider what core value you hold that was behind the little thing that you did.

I pray that we can all be good managers of even the little things God has entrusted to us. And I pray that the choices we make about little things and big things are choices that bring honor to our Heavenly Master. Amen.