

15th Sunday After Pentecost

Year C

18 September 2022

Do you know how when a child loves a book, they read and re-read so many times that you know it from memory? You feel as though you've read it to them a hundred times...because you probably have! The children's story that looks a little worse-for-wear at my house these days, as a result of being loved so greatly, is *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson¹.

In this book, a mouse takes a stroll through the deep dark wood, and as he is on his way, he is approached by one predator after another. A snake, an owl, and a fox all invite the mouse to lunch; a trick meant to lure him into *being* the lunch. Seeing through their thinly veiled plot, the mouse invents a predator greater than these called the Gruffalo. Though the mouse has no might of his own, he outwits the snake, owl, and fox by telling them that the Gruffalo is a fearsome beast whose favourite foods are scrambled snake, owl ice cream, and roasted fox. The predators are outsmarted by the little mouse, so they leave him alone.

While laughing to himself about the foolishness of the other animals for believing in his fictitious beast, to his utter surprise, the mouse comes face-to-face with a real live Gruffalo! Once again, to escape the threat of being eaten, the mouse tries to convince the Gruffalo that he should not eat him, because he – the mouse – is the scariest creature in the woods. He proves this by telling the Gruffalo to follow him on a walk: ***“Come on, Gruffalo take a walk and see. Everyone is afraid of me,”***. Of course, when the mouse and Gruffalo encounter the snake, owl, and fox, they do run away terrified at the sight of the Gruffalo. But, because of the story invented by the mouse, the Gruffalo thinks that they are terrified, not of him, but of the wee rodent! Finally, the mouse turns to the Gruffalo and says, ***“and now, my tummy is starting to rumble, and my favourite food is Gruffalo Crumble!”*** The Gruffalo quickly flees from the mouse, who is left in peace to eat a nut from the ground.

You see, the mouse understands that the economy of the deep dark woods is driven by the currency of food. The creatures who live here strive to acquire food, as much as they are driven to avoid *becoming* food. Being at the bottom of the food chain, the mouse does not regard the other creatures as food to be acquired, but nonetheless, he understands the currency. It is by his shrewdness rather than his might that he becomes powerful in the economy of the woods.

Some translations of the Bible introduce our Gospel reading for this morning with a similar description of the man described in Jesus' parable: The Parable of the Shrewd Manger. Several other translations title this story, “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager”. As titles often shape our understanding of what follows, perhaps calling the manager ‘shrewd’ rather than ‘dishonest’ is more helpful.

¹ Donaldson, Julia. *The Gruffalo*. Toronto: Macmillan Children's Books, 2016.

After all, we read at the beginning of the parable that charges are brought to a rich man concerning his manager, who is alleged to have squandered his property. When the rich man calls the manager to account for his actions, he is condemned before he is tried: ***“What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.”*** The subsequent actions of the manager result from him assuming that he will lose his position. How does he gain the title of ‘dishonest manager’ if his guilt before his master is never tried or proven? First, it is important to remember that this title is applied to the text as a tool to help us; it is not part of the text itself. Secondly, ‘dishonest’ may have been used to describe not the actions of the manager in squandering his master’s property, but what he deals in; that is, money. Through the text, the word ‘mammon’ is used, which can be translated to worldly riches, or *dishonest* wealth. So, perhaps he is called dishonest, not because of the nature of his actions, but for the currency that he deals in.

Even if we can get past thinking of the manager in this story as being a dishonest person, many of us still find ourselves scratching our heads and the praise he receives from his master for acting shrewdly. Surely a master who is already cross about his property being squandered will be further upset by his debtors only paying him part of what he is owed, right? So then, why is the dishonest manager commended for his shrewdness?

Maybe it is because shrewdness, or wisdom, is a laudable quality throughout Scripture. We are told that wisdom comes from the Lord (cf. Prov. 2:6), and that wisdom is more sustaining than what money can buy: ***“For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it,”*** (cf. Ecclesiastes 7:12). The book of Proverbs says, in no uncertain terms, that there is nothing that is more valuable than wisdom, not even money:

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. (Proverbs 3:13-15)

It could be that the master similarly values wisdom over riches.

Even so, you and I struggle with this parable because we like the sound of an economy of wisdom, but we live in a world where the currency of coin is king. Our world revolves around money. As much as we try to be in the world, but not of it, when we read this parable, we cannot understand the praise of a man who forgives debtors, because the master didn’t get what he was owed. Does the master need this money? Probably not. The only description that we have of him is that he is rich; in other words, he has enough.

What is the result of him not getting what he is owed? Restored relationships. Not only are debts forgiven, but the shrewd manager has traded monetary gain for social reciprocity. He decided that being welcomed into the homes of his master’s debtors was of more worth than calling in their debts in full.

What does this mean for us? How are we meant to respond to Jesus' words: "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." Dishonest wealth, or worldly riches, are so often used by the rich to exploit others. If we have wealth in this world, we are to regard it not as the object of our desire or worship, as many do, but as a tool that we are to hold with an open palm, to the benefit of others. We are to use the *mammon* that we have been entrusted with to restore relationships; to participate in Christ's work to reconcile all things to himself.

So, as the mouse takes his stroll through the deep dark woods, let us journey through our world seeking wisdom, and being guided by it, to deal shrewdly with the *mammon* that we have. May we understand the economy of our world without seeking to gain the currency; but instead, seek God's Kingdom come, for his glory.

Amen.