

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday September 21st 2025 (RCL: Pentecost +15, Prop20 , Ord 25 - Year C)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Church

Bible passages: Amos 8:4-7 and Luke 16:1-13

“As cunning as a Fox”

Do any of you know the meaning of your name? My name, ‘Russell’ has a couple of meanings. One is ‘someone with red hair’. Well, that’s not me! The other possible meaning is, ‘like a red fox’. Now, if I wanted to be an animal, the very last animal I’d want to be is a fox. That’s because people hate foxes. With good reason. They sneak around at night killing things. Who wants to be like that?!

Words like ‘cunning, sly, crafty, and sneaky’ are used, in a negative way to describe these animals. Foxes get painted in a bad light. But in their defence, they do have some admirable qualities. For example, they are incredibly adaptable, resourceful and clever in the way they can find their prey and outsmart their predators.

But there’s another word we could use to describe foxes, and it’s ‘shrewd’. Now we might ask: Is ‘shrewd’ a good quality or a bad quality?

The main character in our gospel reading today is described as ‘shrewd’. So, we might think he’s like a fox – cunning as a fox. And we might assume this is a bad thing. But in the parable his shrewdness is actually commended by his wealthy master. Then Jesus himself commends that quality.

This is a parable, and teaching of Jesus that is not only confusing, it offends our sense of justice. It’s not fair. It’s not right. How can Jesus praise someone who is so dishonest and rips people off? Well, if we struggle with this text, we are not on our own. Most biblical scholars agree that this is one of the hardest teachings of Jesus to interpret, thus the interpretations vary a great deal. So feel free to have a different interpretation than mine!

By way of background, this manager is probably someone who managed the leaseholders on behalf of a wealthy landowner, taking a wage or commission to do so. He is accused of somehow wasting his master’s assets. The master tells him he will be fired but first wants to see a report of the guy’s dealings. The manager is devastated that he will lose his job. He doesn’t have the skills for any other job. There is no social welfare for unemployment. He’s in a pickle, and he knows it.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, so he madly hatches a radical plan, to drastically reduce what the debtors owe, in order to quickly win some friends, who might then look after him when he’s out of work. Smart.

At this point, interpretations vary. Some say his generous discount to the debtors came out of his own pocket. That’s possible. But it’s more likely he was short-changing his boss, given that the debts were probably owed directly to the master. Either way he’s still being shrewd because it will win him lots of friends that will serve his needs later on.

If indeed he’s ripping off his boss, what can the boss do about it, anyway? He can’t turn around and demand full payment from those lease holders as that would bring dishonour upon himself, and that would be worse than losing the money. He knows he’s been played. Check mate! He surely despises the manager because of it, but he has to admit he’s been outsmarted by the shrewdness of the guy, and he has to commend him for that.

Have you ever found yourself despising someone, yet admiring their cleverness? It happens to me often, especially when I listen to certain politicians and world leaders speak. In my view they might be fundamentally wrong, but I have to admire their cleverness!

So, although this parable grates on us, we can maybe understand why the man's shrewdness is applauded.

Let's think for a moment what that word shrewd actually means. Well, there's lots of synonyms! Clever, creative, cunning, perceptive, astute, insightful, adaptable, opportunistic. It's an impressive list.

On one hand it sounds a lot like our earlier description of the fox, making it sound like a list of negative traits. On the other hand, they can all be very positive traits, which can be used in positive ways – if used in the right way – which I believe is the message of this parable, if I'm understanding how Jesus is using it.

Speaking of using shrewdness in good or bad ways, our other reading today from Amos highlights, sadly, the way shrewdness was being used for evil in the time of Amos. Through the prophet, God rebukes those with power and money for the way they 'trample the needy' (v4). These powerful people are indeed very clever and creative in how they rip off the poor for their own benefit, by: "Skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat." (v5-6 NIV). Impressively shrewd and clever – but God can see right through to the selfish and evil intent of their hearts and the harm it causes to those already downtrodden. If only their cleverness and cunning could be channelled for selflessness and generosity to others.

Doesn't our Lord want us to channel our shrewdness in the same way? At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus points the finger at the 'people of the light' (v8), which I guess is *us* - essentially tell them (therefore telling us today) that we could do with being more shrewd for our cause – more shrewd in the church.

You know that we as the church are a bit like that manager. We are in a desperate situation. We're stuck in a predicament. Ageing, declining, seen as irrelevant in society. We're in a spot. This parable challenges us to get clever. Use a bit of cunning. Gather together the skills and resources God has given us and use them – *really* use them to find a way out of our pickle. Like the fox we must be adaptable and smart in what we do next. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

So, in summary, the manager is impressively shrewd under his desperate circumstances, he just uses it wrongly, with purely selfish intent, and Jesus tells his listeners to also be impressively shrewd, but with *Godly* intent. That's it.

But there's a twist! All good stories should have a twist, right? Could it be that this manager is, in fact the one Jesus feels most sorry for? Did you notice in verse 1 that he was '*accused*' of mismanagement? It doesn't actually say he did mismanage things (although later Jesus does call him 'dishonest' in v10 – which could be in relation to scheme to get friends). Maybe he's just a guy who's made a few innocent mistakes and now he's lost his job – without even a second chance. And now he gets labelled a sinner. Let's remember who it is that Jesus favours in the gospels. It's the sinners – whoever and wherever they are, and for whatever reason they're labelled 'sinners'.

Sometimes those who are already trampled down, end up committing more and more crimes in their desperation. The other day we watched a movie called, “Night Always Comes”, in which a young woman is about to lose possession of her family home due to financial hardship. In her desperation she steals a bit of money. Then it becomes stealing a car. Then selling drugs. Then someone dies. It keeps getting worse. She gets stuck in a downward spiral. She’s certainly very clever and cunning how she survives but she can’t seem to get her life back on track.

So maybe this manager is simply one who is caught in the same downward spiral? I don’t know. It’s just an interesting twist.

Whatever our interpretation of this parable, what matters most is what Jesus says in the last few verses.

In verse 10 he says, “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”. For me that means, let’s be *shrewd* for God in the little things – in all the little everyday ways in which we think and act. That’s where it all starts. Maybe shrewdness for God is a part of our faithfulness?

Then in verse 13, those well-known words, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” It’s impossible to serve two masters. We have been given the ability to be shrewd in how we live, along with lots of other gifts and abilities. We can use what we are given to serve human wealth, or we can use what we are given for a much deeper, more enduring, more lifegiving outcome that supports all that God loves in this world. That’s the kind of shrewdness God wants of us.