

*The Shape of Things to Come* (Luke 16.10-13)  
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I think I learned everything I know about stewardship from Mr. Haitsuka. This is a novel thought, since I'm sure he never mentioned the word to our children's Sunday School class at the Kailua Baptist Church. No, there were other words I can remember him saying, Hawai'ian words like *keiki*, *ohana*, and *aloha*, alongside Bible words like *love*, *Jesus*, and *God*. But, if Mr. Haitsuka never once mentioned the word stewardship to us six-year-olds, and I'm fairly certain that he didn't, he did have his own way of showing us what it might mean. It was a very particular way that involved the blending of stories and cultures yet resulted in a kind of take home prize for every student. Perhaps that's why I remember his class so vividly.

Mr. Haitsuka's class was held in a small room with good windows decorated with children's artwork. It had a rug in the center where we could all sit in a circle as we told and listened to stories. At the side of the room stood a miniature table or two surrounded by disheveled chairs. I'm sure there were other things in the room, but the rug and the tables stand out in my mind because they played such important roles from week to week. Like many Sunday School classes, we included in our lesson the telling of a story from the Bible. This was done in a casual yet serious way. Gathering ourselves in a cross-legged circle on the rug, my classmates and I would listen as Mr. Haitsuka began to tell us another story about Jesus. Mr. Haitsuka was a Japanese-American man, probably in his mid-thirties at the time, though I thought he was very old. He wore the standard Hawai'ian Sunday attire. Flowery aloha shirt, light-colored slacks, and sandals left respectfully at the door. He had a thick mop of black hair, a broad and easy smile, and a

deep voice that would sometimes fall to a whisper during his dramatic stories. I remember him as a captivating storyteller, but this was so not only because he himself was gifted but because he brought out the gifts in everyone else as well. For, while he told us the stories of Jesus, he would always engage us with questions. “So Jesus met this woman at the well,” he might have said. “What do you think he did?” “And the man on the side of the road was hurt, but no one would stop. I wonder why the Samaritan stopped?” “But Jesus told his friend to put away his sword. Have you ever heard anything like that?” In every case, Mr. Haitzuka was met with a chorus of six-year-old responses from the circle. And here I couldn’t tell you what we said, though I bet we came up with a few quotables. What I can say is that each of us was invited into the story that was being told, to hear its questions and make our own answers. With time we came to understand, in the most elementary of ways, that the story of Jesus and his followers was still happening and that our Sunday School class was somehow a part of it. Every week Mr. Haitzuka ended the class in a very Japanese way that underscored the truth that we were to embody the things we’d talked about together.

After telling our stories and playing games or having activities, Mr. Haitzuka would invite us to the tables at the side of the classroom. This was the final exercise every week, and it was, by far, the most exciting. Reaching into his satchel, our teacher would retrieve a stack of finely cut paper squares. The paper came in all sorts of beautiful colors and patterns. I remember solid reds, blue with golden inlay, and simple, elegant white paper. As Mr. Haitzuka, set the paper on the table, he would remind us of the day’s Jesus story. “So Jesus spoke with the woman,” he might have said, as he laid the first sheet of paper down and creased it at the center. “He did not want to be enemies, but

friends.” Another fold, careful hands pressing the corners. “That Samaritan helped the stranger.” His pace quickened, the paper triangled and twisted. “So perhaps this could help us remember our story.” And there it was. A beautiful origami crane. Or sometimes it was a frog. Or a bear. Or a lotus. It seemed to me like Mr. Haitsuka could take a piece of paper, and, while reflecting on the Jesus story, make it into anything. Whatever he made was a gift, given to each of us to remind us in the days to come. He always gave us paper so that we could try, too. But whether our cranes looked like cranes or not, he would sit patiently at the table folding and helping until everyone had something to take home. I can still remember proudly carrying small paper shapes out of the classroom and into the world, where Mr. Haitsuka would have me, have us all, believe that we were a part of the stories we told.

This morning we told a story. Well, it wasn’t so much a story as it was a reading of something that Jesus said. There is a reason that it reminds me particularly of the ending of Mr. Haitsuka’s classes, but I’ll come to that in a moment. First, I’d like to pause as I was taught to do as a child and simply sit with the story’s questions. In the Book of Luke, Jesus says, “Anyone who can be trusted in small matters can also be trusted in great; and anyone who is dishonest in small matters is dishonest also in great.”<sup>1</sup> This is an interesting turn of a phrase, wherein the rabbi states something both positively and negatively at the same time. “Anyone who can be trusted in small matters can also be trusted in great [ones].” Some translations put this in the language of faith, offering that any of us who has faith in small ways can also be found to have it in some sort of greater measure as well. Conversely, to the extent that we don’t show trust or faith in small

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 16.10, Revised English Version

ways, we probably don't have it on a larger scale either. So what does it mean, then, to be trustworthy in small matters or faithful in small ways? What was Jesus inviting us to do? How do we understand the relationship between the smallest individual act and the much greater story of which we are a part? Following Mr. Haitsuka's example, these are not questions that I will attempt to answer for all of us. These are questions for each of us to ask ourselves before offering our perspective to this community of young-hearted inquirers called Covenant, sitting, however metaphorically, on the rug in the center of the room sharing a story every Sunday morning. What I can do is simply offer my own response, which has to do with an understanding of stewardship.

It seems to me that scattered throughout the teachings of Jesus lay the persistent ideas that the kingdom of God is present in the here and now and people always possess the choice to enter it or not to enter it. More than a kingdom, however, it is a movement, an ongoing story to which we may join ourselves by making peace, caring for the poor, and inviting everyone to the table of a common meal. These things sound grand enough, but, if the Jesus story is any evidence, or if our own stories are, then they actually begin very simply. Making peace, caring for the poor, and inviting everyone can happen one moment at a time, in the smallest of ways. Making peace begins with a kind word. Caring for the poor begins with a first Sunday food offering. Inviting everyone begins with a state of mind. Such small steps, really. Small, trusting, faithful steps. The good news that Jesus came to teach is that it isn't really that hard to love each other if we just take the first step. And the good news that he came to teach is that once we take the first step, the journey is begun. "Anyone who can be trusted in small matters," he said, "can be trusted also in great." This would actually be a lovely place to stop. We could fold

these words into a shape to take home with us, remembering in the week to come that every act is a part of a greater drama and each of us will be given chance after chance to choose the peaceful, the just, and the kind. But Jesus added something else with a bit of an edge. The shape he's folded has at least one angle sharp enough to prick.

“No slave can serve two masters,” he said. “For either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and Money.”<sup>2</sup> These are rather bold words of the rabbi. We could soften them a bit if we wanted, by noting that other translations contrast God not necessarily with money but with mammon or wealth, muddying the water just enough that we wouldn't have to talk about money specifically. But we might be wiser to simply sit with the tension for a moment. Again, following Mr. Haitzuka's lead, I might just ask a question or two. What is it about discussing money that gets us so anxious in the first place? How do we understand Jesus' view of material wealth? What did the rabbi teach us it was good for or not good for? Can we relate money to his and/or our vision of the kingdom of God in the here and now, that movement to which we may each choose to join ourselves? And what does it mean that our lives will serve certain masters, whether we are conscious of it or not?

As I invite you to consider your own answers to the questions, I'll confess that my response is a strange sort of gratitude for the tension. I appreciate that Jesus is making a certain demand of me here. Going beyond the poetic aphorism that the small and the great are linked, he asks me if I can name that a bit more explicitly. I hear the rabbi asking the pointed question of how I choose to spend my time, energy, and money. I hear

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 16.13, Revised English Version

him asking the very deepest of questions about how my whole life is situated. Marcus Borg writes that this passage is an example of Jesus asking us about much more than money. Jesus is asking about where our lives are centered.<sup>3</sup> Who or what will we serve? The choice can only be ours when we honestly ask the question. If we can't center ourselves in multiple places, then where will our center be? The rabbi would ground us in his teachings and their questions, which is not to say that money is not important. It is simply to say that money is meant to serve the aims of the Jesus movement, not the other way around. Taken positively, these prickly words can be deeply empowering. They can even be poetic. Which brings me back to Mr. Haitsuka's class.

The real reason that I was drawn back to the memory of my Japanese-American Sunday School teacher on a day given to considering stewardship was that his life and his art were examples to me. At a very early age, he impressed upon me the idea that the story continues and that I can be a part of it. I bring to it my life, my energy, my resources, and my questions. We all do. The lessons Mr. Haitsuka taught me about Jesus and the movement he started have stayed with me for more than thirty years now. Their ideas have changed me and continue to change me. So the time, money, and energy that Mr. Haitsuka gave to the Kailua Baptist Church helped one little boy begin to work out the questions of his own identity. His faithfulness in such small ways has played out for me in larger ways than either of us would have ever guessed. And I see these things happening still. The gifts that people at Covenant give each other every week contribute in the same way to a story much larger and much more beautiful than we know. There is

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 210.

a transparency to our efforts. They show where we are centered. They show who it is that we mean to serve. They show what it is that we believe our lives together are about.

We might just end, then, back at that origami table. There are all sorts of colored papers available to us, representing our time, energy, and talents. But, taking the rabbi's words to heart, we should not be afraid to consider also our money. So we might imagine, at the risk of mixing the sacred and the profane, crisp green bills of currency on the table. And as we consider the story of Jesus and how it relates to our own stories, we might realize that all our money really is is a kind of means to an end. Together we can fold it into any shape that we want. "So Jesus spoke with the woman," we might say, as we lay the first bill down and crease it at the center. "He did not want to be enemies, but friends." Another fold, careful hands pressing the corners. "That Samaritan helped the stranger." Our pace quickens, the paper triangles and twists. "So perhaps this could help us remember our story." And there it is. A beautiful shape all our own. An origami crane of a worship service. A folded frog of a children's program. A paper bear of a vigil held on the labyrinth. A crisp lotus of a visit in a home or a hospital.

Emerson said, "The true thrift is always to spend on a higher plane; to invest and invest...in spiritual creation."<sup>4</sup> On this day, and in the days to come, may it be so with us.

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Wealth" in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 641.