Billy and I are learning a little Spanish

in anticipation of a trip to Spain next year.

We are using an immersion language program

which begins by teaching words and phrases

a person is most likely to need on a trip to a Spanish-speaking country.

We have learned how to order a beer or a glass of wine,

how to call an ambulance

and how to ask for directions to a bathroom.

I think we're all set.

Sometimes, if we're driving on a trip of some distance,

we'll put the Spanish CD on in the car.

A man with a distinctive Spanish accent

speaks a word or phrase,

gives us a chance to repeat it,

then he speaks it again.

It's easy to get in a kind of rhythm,

riding down the road;

the man says “bread”

then the Spanish for it “el pan.”

“El pan,” we say,

and the man repeats after us, “el pan.”

“Wine,” “el vino,”

“el vino, “el vino.”

Along we go, feeling pretty good.

After all, we're speaking Spanish.

And then the man on the CD says something like,

“turn the car around ahead,”

and follows with a flurry of words

that he says so fast

I have no idea what he's saying.

And I was a Spanish major in college!

Well, for one semester anyway.

This flurry of fast talking continues for a while,

then the man changes course.

“White,” “blanco,”

“blanco,” “blanco.”

“Green,” “verde,”

“verde,” “verde.”

Billy and I are back on track,

glad to understand once again what the man is saying.

I felt the same kind of confusion

I have experienced learning Spanish

when I first read today's Gospel lesson.

To be honest,

I felt confused after reading it for the fourth or fifth time, too.

The story starts out pretty straight-forwardly.

“There was a rich man who had a manager,

and charges were brought to him

that this man was squandering his property.”

*El vino,” “el vino,” “el vino.”*

The ending is fairly easy to understand, too;

we've heard Jesus say this before,

“You cannot serve God and wealth.”

*Blanco,” “blanco,” “blanco.”*

It's what comes in the middle

that is kind of hard to translate.

I put this one on Luke.

Did Jesus say all the things in this passage?

There is no reason to think he didn't.

But did he say them in this order

or all at this particular time?

That's difficult to know.

When Luke sat down to write his gospel,

he had access to a large amount of material

that he pulled from several sources.

Luke drew from the writing of Mark.

He also used a source of stories and parables called “*Q*”

and one named “*L.”*

That's material found only in the book of Luke.

As Luke started to put together his gospel,

he had choices to make about what went where.

Of course,

Luke told his version of the life of Jesus in chronological order,

starting with the birth of Jesus and ending with his death.

Even within this framework,

Luke took artistic license

in terms of how he arranged the stories and sayings of Jesus.

That's how we end up with passages

like the one we have today.

I can imagine Luke sitting at a rough wooden table

with a writing instrument and papyrus or parchment,

written sources spread out around him

and oral traditions swimming around in his head.

What sometimes came out of these writing sessions

was beautiful, lyrical and moving;

Luke's version of the nativity

is probably the best known and loved of the gospels.

At other times,

we find impenetrable, mysterious, thick passages like the one today.

Again, I will admit

that I don't really understand either this parable

or what look like add-ons by Luke.

The master commended his dishonest manager for acting shrewdly?

Jesus told his disciples to make friends for themselves

by means of dishonest wealth

so that when it was all gone,

they may welcome you into the eternal homes?

I'm stumped.

But since I am up here to preach the gospel,

this is what I have been able to tease out of this puzzling text.

A certain man was the manager for a rich man.

This manager had mismanaged the man's money,

maybe by tacking on taxes that he kept for himself,

maybe, because he was lazy,

not collecting what was due to his master.

Fearing that he was going to lose his job,

the manager talked to his master's debtors

and told them to slash the quantities of goods the debtors owed,

some of them in half.

In this way,

he could collect some money for his master

and win friends among the debtors,

one of whom might give him a job

when he got booted from his current one.

Then the manager braced himself for his master's anger.

But instead of yelling at him and firing him on the spot,

the master commended the manager for being so shrewd.

Jesus explained to his disciples,

“For the children of this age

are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation

than are the children of light.

Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth

so that when it is gone,

they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Hmmm.

I had to turn to Eugene Peterson's *Message Bible*

to get a little help with this one.

Here's how Peterson puts it,

“Streetwise people are smarter in this regard

than law-abiding citizens.

They are on constant alert,

looking for angles,

surviving by their wits.

I want you to be smart in the same way, but for what is right -

using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival,

to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials,

so you'll live, really live,

and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

That reminded me that Jesus didn't always hang around

with people who thought they would be saved

by their good behavior (think Pharisees and scribes).

Rather, Jesus liked to spend time

with those who were shrewd or cunning or even dishonest

(read Zaccheus and some of Jesus' own disciples).

Jesus was shrewd himself;

he knew that by pulling in those

who were smart in the ways of the world,

his kingdom would be made stronger.

Jesus recruited street people,

those who were on constant alert,

looking for angles,

using their wits to survive.

Jesus needed disciples who were creative with resources,

not in an illegal way,

but in a way that maximized the effectiveness of his mission.

For when the message that was to be shared

was about radical forgiveness and love,

its messengers had to use some unorthodox methods

to make sure the message got to those who really needed to hear it. What had been shared primarily as oral tradition –

people sharing the good news of Christ as it had been told to them

was now to be written down,

so more people could hear it and read it.

Those who believed that life was all about

making as much money as possible

and keeping it all for themselves

were being shown how their wealth might be used

to help their neighbors.

People who could hardly wait

to spread gossip about those around them

were being offered a new way to see them,

as partners in a holy cause.

Jesus wants us – his church -

to be smart in the same way,

smart about what furthers his reign of love.

Jesus instructs us to use our resources:

money, facilities, ways of communicating,

and most of all ourselves –

to spread the gospel message of mercy and grace.

Not dishonestly,

not for personal gain,

but astutely, cleverly,

so as many people as possible hear the good news.

You and I are heirs of a sacred trust.

What has been handed over to us by the many generations before us,

we now offer to others.

We have been given a holy gift –

our faith, to be sure,

but also the one in whom we place our faith,

a flesh and blood savior,

gentle as a babe,

stronger than all the rulers of the countries in the world

put together.

We are called to use what we have,

both around us and within us,

to serve the Christ who lives among the ruins of this world,

among the selfishness and greed and corruption

that keep so many bound in chains.

We serve the living Christ and not ourselves,

that all may be freed from what binds them,

so all may know his love.

I guess I said a lot

for someone who didn't know what to say.

Such is the curse of the preacher.

I know it's not enough,

but we will be around for more Sundays

and more opportunities to delve into God's word

and discover what it means for us.

For now,

I share what I do know:

Jesus loves us.

Jesus loves this church and this parish,

which has been faithful in many things

and foolish in some.

Jesus loves the rich man and the manager,

the rule-keeper and the rule-bender.

Jesus loves all those who are understand his word

and those who are confounded by it,

even when those are the same people. Amen.

*Pentecost 18C*

*September 18, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 16:1-13*