

## Wealth is unfair

By [John K. Stendahl](#)

September 16, 2013

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Stendahl's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

"Life isn't fair," my four-year-old granddaughter once told me. She offered this judgment as a thoughtful observation, not a whining complaint.

I remember taking genuine pleasure in her remark—not just a delight in her early capacity for philosophical reflection, but also a sense that this particular wisdom could be of blessing in the life ahead of her, to temper excessive expectations and guard against disfiguring resentments. The unfairness of life—the cruelties of fate and the uneven distribution of goods and opportunities—was bound to confront her many times, and I wanted her to be ready.

Such acknowledgment of unfairness is one reason I am so attracted to the parable of Luke 16:1-9. When Jesus speaks of wealth here he calls it *adikia*, an adjective that may be translated "dishonest" or "unrighteous" but means most literally "unjust" or "unfair." I find the latter translation most helpful in this case.

For is not wealth always so, the result of accidents of birth or fate or of historical injustice? Even if we cannot bring ourselves to agree with Proudhon or Prince Kropotkin that "all property is theft," most of us surely know at the least that we live on stolen land, the beneficiaries of past ethnic cleansing. This parable is a provocation to a creative use of this unjust wealth, not a justification of it.

Unfairness applies also to the strengths and delights of our lives. To remember that, I sometimes respond to the question "How are you?" with "Better than I deserve." I wish to receive all good as grace, with gratitude for blessing rather than with a claim of right. (The response also offers a playful parody a proudly humble Lutheran.)

Still, when my granddaughter so pleased me with her words I almost immediately felt a twinge of fear: fear that she'd grow up with cynicism about the world or callous acquiescence to its injustice or, worse yet, feeling free to treat others unfairly. That of course is not at all what Jesus intends in this story.

So I quickly came back to her with this response: "Yes, Samantha, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to make it as fair as we can."