

“When Honesty Isn’t the Best Policy”

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Text: Luke 16:1-13

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Many of you are familiar with You Tube – the internet site where countless people post homemade videos for countless others to view. You can see all kinds of stunts, practical jokes, musical acts, and especially mistakes or embarrassing moments of celebrities. Actor Michael Richards’ racial tirade was posted – Miss Teen South Carolina’s nonsensical answer to a question re: schools and geography ended up on You Tube.

Had “You Tube” been around in 30 AD, I have no doubt that this parable from Jesus would have ended up there, probably to the embarrassment of Jesus’ followers. After all, it appears that Jesus praises dishonesty through the use of this parable. This story has caused problems for the church ever since Jesus told it. Some have tried to deny that Jesus really related this particular parable. Perhaps it was inserted into the New Testament by Luke or a disciple of Luke or someone else. But if new materials were to be included, why this story? Why would anyone want to include a story through which the leader advocates dishonesty?

Don’t most of us consider honesty as an integral part of the Christian ethic? We teach our children that honesty is the best policy – that it pays more than it costs to be honest – that there is no acceptable substitute for honesty and no valid excuse for dishonesty. Given what we say we believe about honesty, this parable is a real problem. It is filled with dishonesty, deal cutting, confusion, conniving, and vindication.

Oh, it starts off as a pretty clean story – an employee wastes an employer’s resources. The Revised Standard Version tells us the employee is a steward – the New Revised Standard Version uses the word “manager.” When it’s discovered that the manager has been guilty of gross mismanagement, the boss tells him to clean out his desk, and to give an accounting of his financial activity. There’s a sense of fairness about it all. The one who violated another’s trust must face the consequences. Now if the parable had ended there, it would be easy to preach and easy to understand. We could cut the sermon short and call it good. But it’s at this point that the story gets complicated and more problematic.

The employee panics because he sees himself without a job, so he decides that he will make an effort to secure his own future. He goes to the master’s debtors and makes a deal. He sells the debts at a discount. When he returns to his boss and reports what he’s done, the manager receives praise and gets his job back!

Now when we hear any parable of Jesus, we have a tendency to identify or have sympathy for a particular character in the story. When we read the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, depending upon our experience or our stage in life, we may identify with the rebellious young brother, the long suffering elder brother, or the forgiving father. So with whom do you identify in this passage? The employee or the employer?

The employer – the boss – is obviously wealthy – he’s the corporate fat cat. He’s the CEO that makes a bundle while his employees struggle to get by – who will retire with pension and stock options and all kinds of perks while his workers will face layoffs and cutbacks. Whether it’s “the mark” in *The Sting* or the casino owner in *Oceans 11*, there is often something inside of us that has us rooting against them and their wealth or their arrogance. We sort of want to see the little guy – the underdog – put one over on the boss. So maybe our sympathies don’t really lie with him. Maybe we are on the manager’s side. Maybe we feel for him because we’ve had to stand in front of the boss’ desk and explain our actions. A mistake was made and we were called to account. However, the manager didn’t just forget to add or subtract some dollars – he didn’t just misplace the office petty cash fund. He wasted his boss’ money. He blew it – the same word used for what the Prodigal Son did with his dad’s money is used here – he wasted – squandered it – he violated the trust of his boss. Now he finds himself out on the streets and is going to have to find different employment. But he says that a shovel or a rake doesn’t find his hands, and he’s certainly not going to stoop to asking for help. He doesn’t want to give up his lifestyle – so he calls together those that owe his boss money. One by one – he takes them into the fancy board room – lays on the charm and sweet talks them.

To one debtor who owes the boss \$10,000 – he says – “I’m gonna make you an offer you can’t refuse. You owe \$10 grand – give me \$5 thousand and we’ll call it good.” Falsifying invoices – shorting the “accounts receivable” ledger – scratching the backs of the debtors in hopes of having them scratch his by offering him hospitality when he’s standing in the unemployment line.

Is this really the character with whom we'd like to identify? Sometimes we like to see the rich get taken down a notch, but by a selfish, lazy, disloyal liar? But then again, maybe the boss got what he deserved all along. After all – he's blinded by the manager's "shrewdness." He moves from telling the manager, "You're a crook. Show me your ledger and don't let the door hit you on the way out," to "You're a genius – and here are your keys. Welcome back!"

So with this parable, is it a matter of choosing the lesser of two evil characters? Why would Luke include a messy parable in his witness about Jesus? Why have this as part of the words of Jesus, when Jesus finds something commendable in a person who has acted dishonestly? If neither of the main characters in this parable are model citizens or worth emulating, what's its value?

Well, we need to remember a couple of things in experiencing this story. First, we are all a mixed bag of the commendable and the less commendable. Love of family, generosity, and loyalty are traits to be praised in persons with some unsavory ways. It is enough that Jesus did not commend the dishonesty, a quality in the man that should not discolor everything else about him. What is commended is not dishonesty, but shrewdness. The word "shrewd" has so commonly been associated with self-serving behavior, if not ethically questionable behavior. When we think of a shrewd person, we often think of them as shady – someone with beady eyes – it's definitely a negative image. But in the world of Luke, shrewdness could be more positive. A shrewd person could be clever, insightful, prudent, even wise.

Jesus says that the children of this age – secular society – have their act together when it comes to shrewdness – cleverness – and that the children of light – Jesus' disciples – are to be just as shrewd – just as clever – just as creative. Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it's gone your friends may welcome you into eternal homes. In other words, for all the dangers in being wealthy and having possessions, it is possible to use resources in ways appropriate to life in the Kingdom of God. It is possible to use our possessions and our money so as to witness to God's love for all and God's will for justice for all.

Maybe this is a good test to put to every line item in the church budget. How does this expenditure witness to God's love for each and every created thing? How does that line item contribute to God's will for justice for all of God's children. And we should be asking those questions about our own personal budgets as well. How does my use of my income witness to God's desire to restore the world to a place of love and justice?

Jesus also says whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. I believe He wants us to understand that the life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. The one who is faithful in today's nickels and dimes is the one to be trusted with the big account, but it's easy to be indifferent toward small obligations while quite sincerely believing oneself fully trustworthy in major matters. This parable is a good reminder that life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us this week will not christen a ship, write a book, end a war, dine with the president, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit someone who is homebound, tell a child a story, go to Bible study, and feed the neighbor's cat. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.

I believe Jesus is calling us as children of light to be shrewd, clever, bold, creative, imaginative, risky in our Christian life and witness. These are the adjectives that ought to characterize the life of the Christian community as it testifies to God's love for the world and God's desire for the world.

As we as a congregation continue to minister and plan for the future, I am prayerful that we will be imaginative and creative and bold. That we will be risk takers for the Kingdom of God, that we will let go of the seven Deadly Words which are "We have always done it that way," and continue to think creatively. As we consider the possibility of relocating – of hiring additional staff, of figuring out which form of structure or organization works best for our ministry – as we seek in the weeks ahead to secure leadership and dollars for 2008, let us do so with a sense of shrewdness, of boldness, creativity of risk.

When the kids were younger, we often attended geology field trips through our 4-H Club. In searching for rocks and minerals and fossils, it was often necessary to drive into a field or pasture – usually there were tracks or ruts in the road to follow. For an easy, relatively smooth ride you needed to stay in the ruts – follow where everyone else had gone before you. Sometimes when you got out of those ruts, it was a rough ride – it could also be a little dangerous – but you got to see things that no one else got to see – wonderful things,

beautiful things, exciting things. The true fossil treasures were discovered off the road.

I believe that's the way it will be for our congregation for the next ten years – uncertainty – opportunities to get sidetracked – situations in which we'll have to take risks. But there will be moments of incredible beauty and witness and ministry and service. May we be shrewd enough, clever enough, bold enough, faithful enough to take the risk, and get out of the ruts.

Let us pray: Lord, the story from Luke is an ingenious story – so daring and imaginative. It invades the world of profit and loss to illustrate for us the great importance of living creatively for you. Teach us to think creatively and boldly as this manager did, and to use all our resources and energy in behalf of those who matter to you – all of your children. Amen.

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