

“Shrewdly Virtuous”

Date: September 23, 2007

Script: Luke 16:1-13

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There is a story told about a man in West Berlin years ago who worked in the eastern sector of that divided city before it was united. He would ride his bicycle to work each day and carry a bag of sand. Each day the surveillance officer at the checkpoint, suspicious of smuggling, would inspect the worker, and his bag of sand, but never found anything. After months of this daily routine, the exasperated guard finally bargained with the worker, saying that he would let him smuggle whatever he had in the sand if he would tell him what it was. To the guard's aggravation, the West Berliner confessed that he had been smuggling bicycles.

We kind of like a story like that don't we? The trickster pulling a fast-one over on the one in power. A modern-day version of the type of trick in our Gospel today might go something like this:

Once there was a certain Vice-President of a pump manufacturing company. His oversight was of the technical changes to the pumps they were producing. In a reviewal of his work as Vice-President, it came to light that his work had been sloppy and further that he had been leaking ideas on next year's changes in their pumps to another pump company, and receiving quite a sum for those secrets.

The Executive Vice-President of operations called him in and asked him about the allegations. The man asked for a couple of weeks to prepare a defense.

The guilty man began his work fast: he called in his engineers, draftsmen and reviewed with them all of their cutting-edge work and advanced planning. He knew that he was going to be fired—for he was guilty. He did not want to go to work with another company as a draftsman, he felt that that was beneath him. And now armed with his inside knowledge of the business, he knew that we wouldn't be without work for very long. Any pump company would jump at the chance to hire someone with all the inside details of the competition's new line.

If effect, that is the parable that Jesus told in today's lesson. And Jesus' commentary on it? Jesus said, **“That man is on the ball. I'd sure like it if my people schemed that hard.”**

Indeed, this is a troubling parable. All we've heard about Christianity is that it is a decent, respectable religion that honors hard work, honesty, integrity, and devalues

money and the material world as an attempt at security. But this story makes us wonder. Today, would Jesus commend Bill Belichick for cheating in football? Would Jesus express praise for those who knowingly issued questionable mortgage loans... riding the real estate bubble until it crashes and then jumps off?

None of Jesus' parables are easy to understand, and most have a kick—a paradoxical twist—a surprise turn that shocks us and makes us wonder. One commentator wrote about this parable: There is "nothing edifying about it." Augustine said, **"I can't believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord."** Roman Emperor Julian in 350AD after reading it renounced Christianity and tried to bring back pagan worship. The Gospel writer Luke apparently was even a little squeamish about it, since he tried to soften it by tacking on some unrelated sayings at the end; he inserts Jesus' saying that you **cannot love God and money** at the same time— **true, but that doesn't really relate** to this parable. He also has Jesus warn us that we need to beware of someone who **is not trustworthy in small things** because they will not be trustworthy in **big** things. Once again, good advice, but not to the point of the scandal here. Faced with a passage like this, it is tempting for a preacher like me to abandon the lectionary or at least choose another passage to preach on. But a careful reading of the passage reveals something of the Gospel, even in this story.

I. Shrewdness

The heart of the matter for me is found in verse 8, where the "Master" commends or praises the unjust steward, not for dishonesty, not for a lack of integrity, not for being lazy, but for his shrewdness, his acumen, his intelligence, his prudence. Here was someone who was stuck between a rock and a hard place and by his shrewdness was able to come out on top.

In a wistful manner, Jesus reflects that his followers do not operate with the forethought and wise-sense as those who are looking out for number one. My sense is that Jesus is telling his disciples and us that indeed we have come upon a crisis— **a spiritual crisis that demands an urgent and decisive response**. The call of God upon our lives *does* demand a response. Faced with the loss of his position, the steward acted decisively to provide for his future. There are times in our personal lives when this crisis is upon us. Do we act prudently to ensure our spiritual future? Do we step up to the plate, make the commitment, the hard choice between our selfish ego drives and God's values... do we jump into a new realm of trusting God with our future? Do we give ourselves to God completely?

And perhaps there are times in our corporate life as a congregation when we are faced with a narrowing of our life...options running out in the status quo... a crisis

that demands a decisive response that ensures our future and connection with God's spirit. Perhaps such a time is now for our congregation. My sense is that there isn't a right or wrong way for us to proceed into our future, but *how* we go into that future (God's future) is the telling thing. We can be church in a right or wrong way...a healthy or unhealthy way... a faithful or faithless way.

This parable suggests that Christ wishes us to use all our skills, abilities, tools, intelligence, and energies in doing God's work too... to respond to this crisis in such a way as to ensure our future.

Jesus calls us in our individual ministry and in our church's ministry to get serious. But I discovered this week that there is more going on here than just that message.

II. GRACE

Robert Farrar Capon, the same scholar who helped us in last week's sermon on the lost sheep and coin, came to my rescue once again (I do read other scholars by the way). In his book *The Parables of Grace*, he suggests that we look at this parable as a parallel to the Prodigal Son parable which comes just before this passage in Luke's gospel. In fact, he says that we ought to look at the unjust steward (dishonest administrator) as the Christ-figure. Before we dismiss this possibility, let's hear him out. Both the unjust steward and the prodigal son experienced a form of death— firing for the steward, the loss of his job & livelihood, and for the prodigal Son...eating with the pigs in a foreign country. Each of these characters then knew what is necessary for them to get along in life. We impose all kinds of repentance motivations upon the prodigal (we point out that "he came to himself"), but most likely he just knew where he could get a hot meal, a warm bed, and some shoes. The prodigal returns home, speech ready to manipulate his father— the unjust steward gains favor with others by massive slashes of their debt. Each gains a new form of life. The Son is welcomed back home with a party... the dishonest steward is welcomed into the homes of the debtors and even praised by the man he cheated.

Capon says that

“The unique contribution of this parable to our understanding of Jesus is its insistence that grace cannot come to the world through respectability. Respectability regards only life, success, winning; it will have no [part] of grace that works by death and losing— which is the only kind of grace there is.”

"Grace that works by death and losing." That sounds like Jesus' life. Jesus' ministry was not successful in the eyes of the world... by any recognizable standard it was a failure; a savior does not die a criminal's death by execution. He led a small movement, collected a few faithless followers who in the end betrayed him, denied him and hid in fear while he was killed the most disgraceful death Rome could inflict. Yet it is in such a failure that we see how God's grace works.

The love of God which we call grace is not something we can earn— by being respectable, honest, hard-working. It is good to be honest, respectable, full of integrity—don't get me wrong, but those things won't make God love you. God's great love simply is...even for scoundrels like the prodigal, like the unjust steward, like you and me occasionally.

Years ago I was reading in a book about a mother who struggled with her difficult son. He was violent, uncontrollable. She tried to manage him, tried to love him, tried to make him see that his behavior was not God's will for him. Every day was a battle of frustration for her as she did what she could for the boy. Yet he continued to yell and abuse his mother and everyone else who dared come within his range.

One day the boy was alone with his dog in the backyard. Trying poorly to teach the dog a trick, the dog became confused and could not follow instructions. The boy boiled with rage and frustration and he kicked the dog in the mouth. In pain the dog whimpered away— bleeding in its mouth. The boy, alone now, sat down on the back steps of the house and stared at the ground in his anger.

The next thing he noticed was the panting dog once again at his side, licking his hands, and wagging his tail. He looked at his hands covered with the dog's blood. Overcome, he ran into the house and begged forgiveness from his mother.

Grace; pure, undeserved, life-giving. How many times have we kicked God in the mouth only to be loved and forgiven? The grace of God we see in Jesus Christ is radical, and for some it is offensive. For me it is the best news possible— for I can be at times a scoundrel, a prodigal, a dishonest selfish person— and I imagine there are time when you are too... and God loves us anyway!

Being loved like that can change us. It makes us want to be the people our dogs think we are. So be it. Amen.