

"Shrewd Mercy and Cunning Compassion"
A Sermon by the Reverend Mat Taylor
Fondren Presbyterian Church
September 19, 2010

Luke 16:1-13

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' ³ Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' ⁷ Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ¹⁰ "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

You can always tell the difference between those who actually read the bible and those who merely praise it. When you really put your nose in the book, you'll find a great many mysterious, strange, and even off-putting passages. This is definitely one of them.

Imagine if I were to tell the story of Enron and praise the late Kenneth Lay as a shrewd example of how we should handle spiritual matters within the life of the church. Imagine if I were to declare that we should be cooking the books when it comes to our evangelism efforts, artificially puffing up our membership rolls and creating false confidence in our efforts to win over new members and converts to the faith.

As it is, this seems to be the kind of argument Jesus is making in this, the strangest of strange parables. He tells the story of a man on the verge of being fired by his master, for there's a rumor circling about that he's been stealing from his master. The master demands a thorough accounting of all the financial records. The manager, apparently, had been stealing from the master, and thus assumes that a complete accounting of all these shady business dealings will result in his immediate termination from employment.

The manager is afraid. He's too weak to dig and too proud to beg, so he comes up with a fool-proof plan. He calls on his master's debtors and systematically reduces their debts, winning the favor of a great many weary souls. I can imagine that, before the master even has a chance to set things right, the manager's actions have caused great praise in the eyes of the community. The manager will now have many friends, and they will be all be more than happy to help him once he's out of work. In a strange twist, once the master discovers the manager's plan he commends the shrewd actions of the dishonest manager.

And so, Jesus tells his followers to be shrewd in their dealings, and to use dishonest wealth in order to acquire friends, and so build treasures in for themselves in heaven.

For the last 2,000 years, folks have been scratching their heads and asking "What?"

In virtually every other passage, it seems that Jesus admonishes his followers to be near perfect—to have impeccable levels of integrity and honesty.

Let your yes be yes and your no be no, he tells his hearers.

If your right eye causes you to sin, cut it out, he says.

If someone strikes your right cheek, turn so that they may strike the left as well.

Here, however, Jesus seems to be saying that we need to be shrewd, cunning, and even dishonest. In truth, there are a number of passages in the New Testament where Jesus can be heard encouraging his disciples to be sly, smart, and cunning, but never "dishonest."

There are all sorts of ways that interpreters have tried to navigate the strange waters of this parable.

One interpreter suggested that Jesus was not simply making up a story, but commenting on a juicy piece of gossip, a story that was well-known, a news story about which the folks were all abuzz.

Another interpreter suggested that, perhaps the master in the story was unjust and had levied heavy penalties against the debtors. The actions of the manager then were actually putting things to rights and correcting wrongs. Far from being dishonest, the manager becomes the righter of wrongs.

Many others have suggested that the parable is, in fact, an indictment against wealth in general. Perhaps, Jesus views all wealth as dishonest, ill-gotten gain and declares that the only thing wealth is good for is being given away in order to build up treasures in heaven.

Who knows if any of these possibilities are correct?

One of the wonderful things about Jesus stories is that they are multivalent. You can hold them up to the light, turn them around in your hands, and see a wonderful array of meaning. Perhaps the only way to misinterpret a parable is to think it one-dimensional, fixed, and intransigent.

I recently encountered a rather novel way to look at this story.

What if Jesus himself is the dishonest manager? Now, bear with me here--this takes a bit of explaining.

Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, most closely allied with the Pharisees. As such, there was an expected protocol of how mercy, compassion and forgiveness were to be distributed. Pharisees and Sadducees both recognized the Temple as the only legitimate broker of divine mercy. But, Jesus had been a disciple of John, and John had set up his own brokerage firm apart from both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. John was offering peace and forgiveness through baptism.

Jesus even seems more radical. He simply wanders the countryside declaring, on his own authority, freedom from sins. NO BAPTISM. NO SACRIFICE. NOT EVEN A DEFINATE MANIFESTATION OF REPENTANCE.

He heals lepers and declares to them that their sins are forgiven. He forgives the woman caught in adultery, even before any demonstration of repentance.

Jesus seems to be giving it all away, free of charge. Perhaps he knows that the religious leaders of the day are just about to shut down his ministry and shut him in a tomb, so he's out to cancel debts and put things to right, winning converts and building up the kingdom of God.

And no wonder the religious leaders are peeved. Jesus is just giving it all away. All the established brokerage firms are going to find themselves out of business if they don't put a quick end to this cheap grace.

Perhaps, here in this strange little story, Jesus is telling us to give away all the grace and love and mercy we can in our short time we have on planet earth.

As a church, we generally are extremely good at performing acts of charity for those less fortunate members of our community. We volunteer down at the soup kitchen, we deliver meals on wheels, we help build Habitat homes, and we read books to the kids at George Elementary. But, how often do we tell others that God forgives them?

What if we decided to embark on radical acts of forgiveness? Imagine if we decided to take communion out into the streets and offered the bread and the cup to those who were most spiritually damaged and forgotten in our community? We have this big, beautiful communion table—what if we loaded it in the back of a truck, took it downtown, and started celebrating communion with folks on the street.

Of course, as Presbyterians, we have rules concerning the brokerage of communion. There are requirements as to how communion is to be celebrated and under what circumstances it is to be administered. Communion is to be withheld from those who are not baptized and from those who have not faith.

But maybe we are withholding it from the very ones who need it the most. The broken-hearted, the down-trodden, the hopeless, and lost are dying in our streets of spiritual hunger, and yet we feast upon the body and the cup all to ourselves.

Baptism. What if we brought baptism to the streets? What if we took the very baptismal font from our sanctuary and brought it downtown and started to baptize bums and crack-heads and prostitutes? What if we started giving away baptisms?

Of course, as Presbyterians we have rules about baptism as well, rules about when and where and how it can be administered and by whom, of course, all wonderful ways to brokerage God's grace and provided job security to professional clergy.

But, what if we started giving baptism away to the spiritually dead—we might witness amazing rebirth and renewal, not only in the hearts of those hurting on our streets, but in our hearts as well.

Yesterday a friend of mine asked me what I'd be preaching on today. I gave him a short synopsis, and he asked, "What would you do if they said 'yes'? What would you do if they said, 'We heard your sermon and we want to start offering baptism and communion to street people?'"

Honestly, when he asked me that question, I felt one emotion: Fear. Fear! His question made me realize that I'm counting on you not taking me seriously. I'm counting on you **not** to say: "Alright, Mat, let's do this thing, let's move the baptismal font and the communion table and start giving away grace to street people." I'm counting on you **not** to challenge me to be radical with the elements of grace that we have at our disposal. After all, I'm the chief broker in our little brokerage firm. And I'm answerable to the other brokers of the Presbytery.

There would be a fair number of you who'd be furious if we moved the table and font down town. They would be sure to get scratched. There would be an equal number of you who'd be incensed if we started giving communion away to nonbelievers and re-baptizing street bums, both of which are clear, unequivocal violations of Presbyterian polity and our theological heritage.

But, you know what scares me the most. It's not scratching the communion table. It's not even violating our theological traditions. It's not even the administrative council that would surely come to relieve me of a many of my pastoral duties.

What scares me the most is moving outside of my comfort zone. I like it here in the comfort of this beautiful sanctuary. I love you folks and I think you love me. We've created a little safe place here. Besides, if street people want to come to us, we're certainly not going to stop them from doing so.

I'm betting that you feel the same way, too. We may talk about scratching furniture and Presbyterian rules, but what really frightens us is being challenged to leave our comfort zone and do something radical.

But, Jesus challenges us to leave every comfort zone we have and journey into the unknown so that we can be bearers of light.

What good is all this light, if we keep it hid under a sanctuary?

So, here's the question for us to ponder, both as individuals and a congregation:

How can we extend mercy and forgiveness to those who are lost in hopelessness, grief, and guilt?

How can we be true light-bearers and not mere brokers of religious instruction?