

sermon-9/23/07 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“An Unexpected Mentor”  
Luke 16:1-13

Jesus’ parable for today is a doozy! Ken Bailey, one of the best commentators I have run across on parables, says this is the most difficult parable in all of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It has baffled even the great scholars. Rudolf Bultmann, the great German theologian of the last century, simply says it is insoluble. One of Christianity’s early detractors, Julian the Apostate, even used this parable to assert the inferiority of Christianity and its founder who would praise such a scoundrel as the dishonest manager in the story.

There are numerous other interpretation problems with this passage as well. Parts of it seems to contradict other parts of it. It is not all that clear what the connection is between the parable and the words that follow. No wonder many of us just scratch our heads as we try to figure out Jesus’ point.

I came across all kinds of potential interpretations in my study of this text this week. One of the most creative says we can update this parable for our times interpreting it as a kind of allegory. Doing that the estate is seen as the earth, the owner as God the creator and the dishonest manager as humanity.

In this interpretation God is upset at humanity’s misuse of the earth. Caring only about our comfort and what will make a profit, we have created an ecological nightmare. Now we are in danger of not being the stewards of creation because our actions will make the earth uninhabitable. The only decisive action that makes sense is to enforce more stringent laws that protect the environment. Such laws may decrease our profits. Other compromises may be needed as well.

Now that is most certainly not what Jesus had in mind in telling the parable, but it is an interesting approach. That interpretation, and other ones that try to make sense of this text, are creative and even relevant, but it might be more helpful to just stick with our uncomfortable feelings and see what meaning arises. That is what Jesus’ audience in the first century had to do.

One commentator notes that the disciples were not rich. They would have hated the owner in the parable, this absentee landlord. Many of the rich in that day got that way at the expense of the poor. But, Jesus has this rich owner being gracious at the end, commending the steward for his shrewdness. That would have thrown the disciples for a loop. Why is Jesus making the rich landlord a good guy?

They would also have hated the dishonest steward. He said he was too weak to dig and too proud to beg. Many of the disciples were poor. Digging and begging were part of their life. They would have found the manager arrogant and insensitive. Yet this dishonest manager gets praised in the parable. They must have thought, “What is going on here?”

We might begin by asking what exactly is being commended in the dishonest manager's actions? Some have said Jesus was not necessarily praising the manager for the specifics of his actions. He may or may not have been ethical in what he did, but at least he acted decisively. He was in a crises, to be sure. He was going to lose his job.

So, facing the crises, he did not just give up. He acted resolutely. He took stock of himself and then acted. His bold actions were even a bit risky. He did what was necessary to get the job done. In discounting the bills of his master's creditors, he was most likely just giving up his commission on the bills. He may have been overcharging his master's debtors, making a lot of money. Now he sees there are more important things than money. He needed to secure his future. Jesus is saying to his disciples, the children of light, they should take note.

First off, I love that title for the disciples—"children of light." It is a great title for any who follow the Light of the World. It is a great title to live into, helping spread God's light to a world being swallowed up in darkness. But if we are to do the work we need to do in our world which seems to be perpetually in crises, we need to learn from the dishonest manager, this unexpected mentor. We need to learn to be decisive and maybe even take chances.

One commentator says the trouble with many children of light is that we are often way too careful, cautious, and afraid to take chances, even for the gospel. That certainly describes the majority in the Christian community in this country. We have been prudent to a fault. We hate being inconvenienced for any stands we might take. Believe me, I include myself in this critique.

But as one scholar writes, "Every time a person follows a call of God, it is abandoning oneself to uncertainty." There is an element of abandonment in almost any act of faithfulness. We can't guarantee that any tough decision we make will work out in the end. We can try and predict the outcome, but uncertainty is just a fact of life for those who follow God's call. We need to be decisive sometimes. We need to step out with resolute action just like the manager in the parable.

In many ways that is what Newport did in this remodeling project. Trying to raise money for a project of this size felt impossible. Deciding to go into debt in order to accomplish what we felt called to accomplish, was difficult for many in this congregation who hate being in debt. We thought it through as best as we could. We were as prudent as possible going into the loan process, but ultimately we had to step out in faith. The building was in a crises of sorts, desperately in need of repairs and upkeep (just ask our Property Committee if you want to know the details). In response, we took decisive action for the building and for the future of Newport.

Certainly global warming and the ecological crises mentioned at the beginning of this sermon is a crises that requires decisive action. How this country deals with the terrorist

threat, or how our county deals with the foster care crises also require decisive action. The Church ought to be a leader in those discussions.

Jesus' parable gives us the dishonest manager as a mentor. Of course Jesus is not urging us to be dishonest in our decisiveness. Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible called *The Message* is very helpful here. He translates verses eight and nine in our text today in the following way:

“Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. 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 is more of a paraphrase, but it is very helpful. I think it captures what Jesus was trying to say to his disciples and what Luke is trying to say to his church and us. We need to be shrewd. We need to be creative. When there is a crises, when the stakes are high, we need to take chances even for what is right.

In order to do that we will have to come to terms with money. It always seems to get down to that doesn't it? Some have complained that all the church does is talk about money. While that is not true, it is true that money is central to the Christian message. It was to Jesus as well. Many of his parables were about money, including this one and the one that follows on the rich man and Lazarus.

The end of the text puts the issue of money about as clearly as can be. “No slave can serve two masters. . . You cannot serve God and wealth.” Until we come to terms with that saying, we will never be able to take chances for the gospel.

Jesus puts it this way. If we can't handle money, how can we handle what is truly important? How we deal with that which is not sacred is a good measure of how we will deal with what is truly sacred. That is very challenging.

Of course, it is difficult to determine who our master is in this life. We walk a fine line trying to be prudent with our relative wealth, making sure we have taken care of our loved ones and our future, and not being so prudent we can't be as generous as God wants us to be. If we are so cautious with our money that we can't take decisive action when we sense God's call to do so, then who is it we are serving? Those are good questions, questions troublesome parables like this force us to confront. Good luck. Amen