

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Luke 16:1-13

“The Crisis Manager”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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There is a scene in the movie “Life of Brian”, by Monty Python, where Brian loses a sandal. In the movie, Brian is a contemporary of Jesus, and through a series of comic accidents, some decided that Brian is the Messiah and declared themselves his followers, won’t give him a moment’s peace – hanging on every word, chasing him around, the worst sort of first century groupies and paparazzi! As he flees the crowd, Brian loses a sandal. When the crowd finds it, someone cries something like: “This is what he meant! From now on we will all go with one shoe!” And they all rip off one sandal and hobble after him. It is ludicrous.

But then, as you watch it, you think (as you are supposed to), have we done something of the same with Jesus? I think the Incarnation – God come among us in human form as Jesus the Christ – means a lot of things. One thing it probably means is this - when Jesus told a story, he didn’t strike a Charlton Heston pose, and intone it in a pious voice, giving Luke time to write it down verbatim. Jesus was a storyteller, a raconteur, who spun parables to make his listeners think and question, probably sometimes to make them laugh and look at the world differently. If we turn each one of them into a solemn morality tale, we’ll probably miss the point – as we chase him down the alley with one sandal raised aloft!

Theologian Elton Trueblood said that when we hear a parable of Jesus, we should always ask, “Is he pulling my leg?” There is humor in some of these. Such good stuff that you can still see it – two thousand years later – underneath the layers that Luke puts on it. I think that when he told this parable of the Dishonest Steward, or we might say the Dishonest Manager, that he was grinning.

The parable goes like this – a rich man, rich enough that he had to hire managers to oversee his various holdings, got word that one of his managers was wasting profits, called him in, said, “Let me see your account books, and by the way, you’re fired.” Almost all the people listening to Jesus worked for somebody else, and they would have sympathized with the manager, not the rich man. So they are listening. Here’s another piece of background for you, which the listeners would have understood—Mosaic Law, the Torah, forbid the charging of interest to another Jew. The Pharisees found a way around that, first by saying a) that the point of Mosaic Law was to protect the poor, and b) it wasn’t really interest, but a fair sharing in the profits of a joint business venture, worked out to the advantage of both parties, and c) if you wished to borrow a little oil or wheat (the two main commodities – which also appear in the parable), then you weren’t poor you were a business partner! Torturous logic, intended to line the pockets of the well-to-do, one supposes. Anyway...

The Manager called in everyone who owed the Master, returned their promissory notes for principal and interest, and had them write new ones – very possibly *without* interest, and at some loss to his boss. “How much do you owe? 100 jugs of oil? Sit down and write me a check for half that, and we’ll be square.” Since he has a few more days on the job, he is still assumed to be an agent of the Master, and it will be assumed that his actions are approved.

He has done three things here – one, he has taken an outside chance at saving his job by collecting some of what was owed, offering a deal too good to pass up; two, he has made allies of his

master's business partners, so if he does get fired he may have somewhere to go; and three, he has made his employer look good, as if he is a religious man, following the Torah and not charging interest to fellow Jews. The boss is going to have difficulty renegeing on the deal, or fire the steward, without looking bad!

Even though the people listening to Jesus tell this parable would have sympathized with this wily character, they would have expected the obvious, that the religious teacher would have the lesson be critical of the steward's dishonest dealings. But Jesus *turns* the parable, and says the master commended the steward for acting shrewdly. No doubt it takes one to know one. That wily steward saved his own hide by giving someone else's money away to the poor!

I recognize this sort of tale. It is a trickster tale – and that character shows up in various cultures. In the Navajo stories of the area I grew up in, it was Coyote who always got in a tight spot and found an innovative, if devious, way out of it. In the Caribbean and Africa, I think it was Anansi (the spider), who played this role, and maybe in these parts Brer' Rabbit.

I am imagining Jesus had fun with this story. And while we would not automatically think of Jesus commending the trickster – and to be fair, he doesn't; he said that the trickster's boss commended the man, and commended him for his shrewdness. By the time this was written down, it already had attracted moralisms to the end of it, additions Luke made, and sayings which are no doubt true. But Jesus seems to end the parable by saying this: “The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

Or to put it in even more contemporary language, hear Jesus ending the parable this way: “The master praised the crooked manager because he figured a way out of his situation! That's what I'm talkin' about! Get up off your rear ends and do something.” This is a story about a guy in a crisis, who used every means at his disposal to get out of it, even the thing that got him into it in the first place – low profits! Or, as Frederick Buechner said of this story: “It is better to be a resourceful rascal than a saintly schlemiel!”

But resourceful for what? The parable is a parable of crisis and a call for action, but with Jesus it is always – however tongue-in-cheek – a call to follow him into the Kingdom of God and live there. So in all of our dealings, financial and otherwise, we need to be clear with ourselves that we are serving God, not serving what Luke calls “unrighteous Mammon”; and all at the same time as we don't get taken for a ride. Christians don't win points for being gullible. Or as Jesus says in Matthew 10:16, citing a whole bestiary as he sends out the twelve: “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so instead, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Tom Long, of Princeton Seminary, said that a better translation than “unrighteous mammon” of “dishonest wealth” would be “the money of this unrighteous age.” That is to say, it is not the money that is corrupt, but the culture. And when Jesus talks about money, he is not talking about dishonest money versus good money, he is talking about all money and how our culture it. Money is not neutral, and it can artificially skew wealth, talent, food, resources. And we pretty much do not have the choice, if we are to live in this world, of being pure and untainted by it. But as Mother Theresa said: “I want willing hands, not clean hands.” And what intrinsic value will our money have if God is bringing a new world into being? We better be ready to live in *that* world.

Luke makes the point at the end of the parable – the money of this age is really given to us on trust and doesn't belong to us. All things are God's. How shrewdly are we managing those things? In the parable, in a fun and clever way, Jesus gives his listeners a call to action. Understand your situation and deal with it.

In the Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah, I heard no such challenge, did you? The prophet is lamenting that the poor are suffering, evidently from a killing drought (do we know anything about that?). "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." And Jeremiah mourns for on God's behalf for "my poor people... is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my people not been restored?" A more difficult question when it is an entire community in question. Would Jesus' story still apply? It is a crisis; understand your situation, and do something about it.

There are a lot of places one could go with these stories. But here's a specific for us at First Presbyterian, I think, when we hear this parable. We have a crisis, and it has to do with money. I know this is not the first time you have heard this, and that Interim Pastor John Bush had something of a "Come to Jesus" conversation with the congregation awhile back.

The truth is, things are going so well that it is easy to overlook the crisis, especially since most of you would not know about it unless you are sitting on the Session. But here's the deal, as I see it: The church is doing well, we are growing, there are increasingly new members, our mission is strong, our internal life is vital and good. We are implementing recommendations from the "Raising the Roof" strategic plan, and some of those are already working. We are over-staffed for our present size, but we are staffed for the growth that will come *because* we are staffed for it. AND we have a plan for how to get in the black financially, and in a couple of years I expect we will be there.

And yet... "There comes a time when Autumn asks, What have you been doing all summer?" I have resisted printing the financial statements in the bulletin, for several reasons. I don't want to scare anybody; I don't want you reading that and getting depressed during one of my uplifting sermons(!); and worship is about worship, not a business meeting. But the lectionary today gave me a direction I couldn't avoid – seeing a crisis and dealing with it. Just like last year, we owe about \$100,000 on a line of credit from the bank. We have had to borrow money to make payroll. We're in slightly better shape than last year, but not good enough to make it through the year as yet. We've saved some money in some places, but got hit with a water leak and air conditioner repairs that hurt us. The budget for this year anticipated a \$35,000 shortfall, and I imagine that's fairly accurate. (It's half the shortfall of the previous year's budget, so we are making good progress.) The other piece of good news is that our First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham Foundation will, next year, begin producing interest income which will help offset the costs of maintaining this beautiful, but definitely historic, 1888 building.

Here's my point in telling you all this – we have a crisis; we need to understand our situation and take action, like that wily Coyote of a manager in the parable. This is part of our common life together as a church, and you have a need and right to know where we stand. We can make it through to the time when we will turn the corner and be on good financial footing. But we cannot do it without one another.

One of our members uncovered an analysis from 1972, showing that if the members of this church had given half a tithe (“Sit down and write half?”), all financial issues would have vanished overnight. That’s still true today, of course. So one possible help would be for everyone to figure what percent you are giving to the church, and increase it a percentage point, and to do it this year for the rest of the year, instead of waiting for next year’s pledge. That would help.

Here’s another “shrewd manager” possibility – but only for those over 70 ½ ... up through December of this year, because of the language of the Pension Reform bill signed by the President, you can give to a non-profit any amount up to a hundred thousand of an IRA, not included as income, and tax free. That’s only for the rest of this year, though.

You’re going to read a story in the next newsletter of one of our church members who was able to make a \$100,000 stock gift to the church – someone you never would have imagined would be able to do that – and how it filled her with joy to be able to do it. For her, and for all of us, it is finally about our relationships – with each other and with God. Whatever his motive, the manager in our parable used the funds at his disposal to cement relationships. Whatever happened, he was going to have to have friends. Mary Schertz wrote: “If even a shifty steward realizes that relationships are more important than money, how much more should the children of light realize that true riches have to do with relationships rather than with wealth or possessions.”

What will make us strong and whole is doing this together, and acting in all our decisions as if we are children of God, and so we are. These relationships matter – with one another in this congregation today, with the saints of the church stretching back in time, who we meet around table in communion, with the saints yet to come, and with Jesus Christ who is the reason that we gather. So if I ever I am tempted to discouragement, looking at our budget and our bills, the greatest truth is this, that through you, the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.