

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

'Rascals'

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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 account 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.'

I received a couple of warnings this week to which I probably need to pay closer attention. The first came from the television news. It seems that the state of New Hampshire is currently being plagued by robbers who are using the social networking site Facebook to their strategic advantage. The robbers check out the statuses of people who are friends of friends, those who haven't adjusted their privacy settings, and notice if those persons mention anything about being away from home or on vacation. If they have reason to believe no one is at home, they strike. The report said that these robbers have broken into 50 homes of absent owners, stealing computers, jewelry, and cash and the common link in all the crimes is a Facebook status.

The other warning came from our security alarm consultant, Mr. Security. He was in the other day to speak to John Goodpasture, Tim Gorden and me about some issues we have been having with unlocked doors, mystery entries and false alarms. Mr.

Security gave us a quick lesson in how burglars have been working in our area. He said that many are trained professionals. They come into buildings like ours for a public event or perhaps to use the rest room. They check out what might be valuable enough to steal, they check out the exits, and they check out the motion detectors. They study them carefully to see where they might walk to avoid being detected. Later at night they return, taking advantage of an unlocked door or breaking a window to get the objects they desire.

These notices about crime left me feeling terribly naïve. I tend to be a very trusting person, which is probably just what the thieves are hoping for. For both the Facebook and the local robbers, the key to success is in the preparation and the shrewdness of the planning.

A student burst through the doors of the school and told his teacher, the great rabbi, that one of the rabbi's friends had just been arrested for burglary. The student expected the rabbi to be shocked, perhaps even devastated at hearing such news. Instead the rabbi said to the student, "My friend the burglar is a great example to us all." The student was puzzled. "How can that be?" he asked. "Your friend is a thief, soon to be a convicted criminal." The rabbi replied, "Look at my friend. Every day he manages to teach me something, even today. When we are sleeping, he is busy working. When others go about their daily activity chattering aimlessly, he is quiet and adept. When others are busy locking their doors, he skillfully knows how to open them. Yes, my best friend the burglar is a true artist and a great teacher!"

This morning the gospel of Luke tells the story of the dishonest manager. He is the manager of an estate and he apparently is very good with numbers. He has been cheating his boss for years by adjusting the numbers in the business computer software program. Finally catching on, the manager's boss calls him in to review the figures and the manager starts to realize that he indeed is in trouble. He might have said to himself, "I don't want to get fired. I kind of like this job. I can't survive on unemployment compensation. I've got to do something quick!"

So the dishonest manager gets together some of his boss' main clients. He meets them at the most expensive restaurant in town and treats them to one last meal. Following dessert, probably crème brulee, he tells them that he will reduce the amount of money they owe his boss. He offers them this favor, purely at his boss' expense. And all of this is planned so that when he gets fired, as he knows he will, the customers might gladly welcome him into their homes and businesses as a friend.

A strange story indeed! I could hardly imagine a loan officer at my mortgage company calling me up and telling me I can receive a 50% discount on my mortgage if I would be nice to him after he was fired. I would be a little uneasy accepting such an offer.

Yet that is the story Jesus tells. And stranger yet is what happens when the boss finds out about his dishonest manager's shenanigans. Instead of firing the bum, he actually commends him! He praises his shrewd behavior. He lauds the intelligence and diligence illustrated in what the manager has done.

What could we possibly learn from such an example? What could Jesus want to teach from such behavior? It would be akin to asking all of us to model the behavior of Bernie Madoff. But it is quite clear to me that Jesus was not commending dishonest business practices-lying and cheating and stealing. Rather I think, Jesus was praising

the dishonest manager's shrewdness and forethought. He was praising ambition, creativity, determination, boldness, and the willingness to take decisive action.

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word translated as "shrewd" can also be used to describe "something that you have wrestled with." Thus the kind of behavior that is supposed to be modeled is not dishonesty but shrewdness- a commitment to a well-thought plan to bring about a desired outcome.

I recall the trial of a forger in Germany about ten years ago. The man was so good at his trade that he actually had experts believing that his diaries of Adolph Hitler were real. When brought before the court, the judge spent most of the proceeding complimenting the forger on his ability. "You have a rare gift," he said. Others in the courtroom were astonished at the judge's behavior but the judge reminded them he was not commending the act, merely the skill.

I think the same is true in this parable of the dishonest manager. Jesus often used the example of a rascal to teach us a thing or two about what God is like and about what we should be like. Remember the judge that wouldn't give the poor widow her due until she bothered him night and day? Remember the man who wouldn't leave the comfort of his bed to welcome a stranger until his door was almost beaten down? Remember the man who found a treasure in the field of a friend and then quietly went out and bought the field so he could profit from his find? Jesus lifts these rascals up as examples of faith! None of them should teach us that God is unjust, or that we should annoy God until we get what we want, or that we are to cheat our innocent friends out of earthly treasure. Rather through these examples, we are meant to learn that if reluctant judges give justice, if grumpy neighbors can get out bed to answer the door at midnight, and if friends can go through elaborate schemes to secure a treasure- how much more will God be willing to do to listen and provide and to protect our needs.

My wife Laura works in a different world than I do. I have to give her so much credit. I don't know if I could handle the kind of corporate red tape and business expectations that she encounters every single day. It would drive me crazy. I suspect many of you run into the same thing in your work. There is a perpetual demand upon your time and your energy. There is an expectation that things will be done in a certain way, even if that way runs counter to your senses and your gut feeling. There is a focus on results, sometimes it seems at the cost of customer service. There is an emphasis on winning and success as salvation, rather than on the lasting things of life we talk about here in worship.

Even as we resent the corporate mentality, there is something that we can learn from it. People who are successful are the ones who set goals. They are pro-active and imaginative in the setting of goals and the acting upon them. People who are successful have discipline. They know how to manage time and energy and effort well. And people who are successful focus on results. They are interested not in staying where they are but in getting someplace. What can the people of faith learn from this? Imagine if we were to take that kind of drive and thinking and focus into the building of the Kingdom of God? How far would be purposes of God be moved if we were to pursue them as others chase worldly success?

The lesson of this parable of Jesus has to do with the shrewdness and cleverness needed by the people of God in the life of faith. Jesus asked, if the people of this world are so motivated and excited about using their gifts and energy to protect

and pursue their own self interest, how much better would it be for those who work toward God's end to use that same kind of imagination and enthusiasm?

We are the managers of the Kingdom of God. Yet our planning, our commitment, our risk-taking, our energy, and our shrewdness pales in comparison with that used by the children of the world.

Yes, today Jesus tells an outrageous parable of a rascal, a scoundrel, a shrewd man of business. He took what had been dealt to him, a rather uncertain future, but worked with it creatively, with a faith that said, "Even this could lead to some good." And by being so bold, he created a better future. By God's grace so can we. We come needing much and sometimes with very little to offer. But in God's grace, faithful acts made boldly can become transformed into something grand and even miraculous. Lives lived with the imagination and risk of faith can produce result greater than a meager investment in protecting the status quo. Learning from rascals, we know that the world will always behave shrewdly. Can we be daring ourselves, in building our lives and our world the way God wants it to be?