

17th Sunday After Pentecost (C/RCL)
Luke 16.1-13
September 23, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Here's the version of today's Gospel, Luke 16.1-13, that we find in *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* by Eugene Peterson. The title is "The Story of the Crooked Manager":

Jesus said to his disciples, "There was once a rich man who had a manager. He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses. So he called him in and said, "What's this I hear about you? You're fired. And I want a complete audit of your books."

The manager said to himself, "What am I going to do? I've lost my job as manager. I'm not strong enough for a laboring job, and I'm too proud to beg.... Ah, I've got a plan. Here's what I'll do... then when I'm turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses."

Then he went at it. One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master. He said to the first, "How much do you owe my master?"

He replied, "A hundred jugs of olive oil."

The manager said, "Here, take your bill, sit down here – quick now – write 'fifty.'"

To the next he said, "And you, what do you owe?"

He answered, "A hundred sacks of wheat."

He said, "Take your bill, write in 'eighty.'"

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 barest essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

Jesus went on to make these comments:

If you're honest in small things,

you'll be honest in big things;

If you're a crook in small things,

you'll be a crook in big things.

If you're not honest in small jobs,

who will put you in charge of the store?

No worker can serve two bosses:

He'll either hate the first and love the second

Or adore the first and despise the second.

You can't serve both God and the Bank."

Where do we learn to be honest and to value what counts instead of what costs the most money? At home and in our church home: in worship and at study and in the Sunday School classroom. This weekend we're blessing and installing the dedicated teens and adults who walk beside and minister to our Sunday School children, our Confirmation Connection youth, and our high schoolers in Breakfast Club. The most powerful teaching comes from personal example, the sharing of stories about where God's story and our story intersect.

The topic this weekend for Confirmation Connection is Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. At the Huddle, the adults' time to plan the lesson together, one of the guides, Terri Restucci, mentioned her childhood in the city of Chicago, and how she rode on public transportation to and from school. At some point her friends figured out how they could "save" money by avoiding paying the bus fare. The first couple kids piled their coins into the meter really fast, so it jammed and didn't register whether the rest of kids had paid or not. She talked about making a simple but important decision not to cheat the transit authority because she knew she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she did. Gaining a dime wasn't worth the guilt and self-loathing she would have felt for "stealing" the money she rightfully **should** have paid to ride the bus. Terri said she has remembered that early decision to be honest many, many times since. It served as the foundation for all the other decisions she's made to be honest, over the course of so many years that she now has children the age **she** was when her friends presented her with the dilemma of whether to serve God or money... whether to save money or follow Jesus.

Jesus knew, too, that the best way to teach (and to preach) is to tell stories. St. Luke is the **only** one who records Jesus' telling of **this** crazy story about the dishonest manager, though. It's puzzling, isn't it? What kind of **role model** is this conniving, scheming man supposed to be?? (He's the kind of guy who would've decided in a New York moment to go ahead and scam the transit authority, jam the meter and pocket his ill-gotten gains ☺.)

I'm tempted to say he's not role model at all, that he's actually an "anti-hero" who's supposed to show us the exact **opposite** of the way we should behave. However, that wouldn't be quite right, because Jesus does say,

... the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light...

Or as Eugene Peterson puts it,

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*....

Can we be shrewd for God's sake? Can we be kind-of-cagey for Christ? Can we be creative for the Kingdom? Elsewhere Jesus says,

Be **wise as serpents**, but gentle as doves.

We're called to be innocent but not naïve, full of love but impassioned for justice, forgiving of sins but not tolerant of sinfulness, self-forgetful but acutely aware of others' suffering and tireless in alleviating the preventable causes of it.

This parable tells us that people of faith need to bring their intelligence and not just their compassion into play. It tells us our morality needs to be lived out on a societal and not just a personal level. Look at AARP, the American Association of Retired People. It's not just a magazine publisher or a clubhouse gathering of those lining up to play shuffleboard or bingo. It's an important lobbying organization. There are an increasing number of retired and near-retirement-age folks in this country. They spend a lot of money. They cast a lot of votes. They are a unique power base. When they speak with one voice, they make themselves heard, about Medicare, about prescription drug benefits, about taxes. They are wise. They are shrewd.

Our Lutheran Office of Governmental Ministry here in New Jersey and in other synods operates similarly. We who are people of faith band together on social justice issues to make our collective voice heard. Lutherans may be in the minority within the mainstream Christian denominations in our country, but 5 million people isn't a number that legislators sneeze at

either. Remember when our congregations sent paper plates to the Governor to urge him to include money for feeding programs in the state budget? Remember when our children sent him Valentines to thank him for doing so? He heard us, not just Lutherans, but **all** people of faith who banded together on behalf of the hungry because we take Scripture literally when God says through the prophet Isaiah (58.6-7):

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice...?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry....?

We take Scripture literally when Jesus says in St. Matthew's Gospel (25.34-35):

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food....”

I feel like I'm becoming more of a savvy saint, more of a clever Christian, when I realize that my hand-written letter to my Congressmen and my vote encouraging legislators to pass budgets that support feeding programs will potentially feed far more people (at home and abroad) than my wallet ever could. The other day our Ministerium learned a lesson, too, in shrewd spending. One of our local churches recently spent \$1,000 to replenish the shelves of the ecumenical food pantry at First Pres. I imagine they went someplace like Costco, where they could buy in bulk for a good price. However, the guest speaker from the FoodBank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties told us that if we become a member and go there, the available food costs just 18 cents a pound.... ('Looks like **that's** what we'll be doing from here on in!)

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.

Whether it's paying our bus fare or advocating for the hungry, may we live faith-full-y this coming week. Remember: little decisions like Terri's can have lifelong consequences. We're teaching the children by what we **do**, even more than by what we **say**. Let's teach them that faith should be active in love, and fueled by intelligence. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham