

Luke 16:1-3
Psalm 107:1-9
Text: Luke 16:8

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

First Sunday in Advent
November 29, 2009

CHILDREN OF LIGHT

“And his master commended the dishonest steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with this age than are the children of light.” *Luke 16:8*

I don't have to tell you that these are trying times, and they demand inventive, clever and determined tactics. This is the renewed challenge of Advent, which demands more than standing in line at 5 a.m. on Black Friday for 50 percent off.

Some of you may recall the story that closed last week's sermon of Mother Theresa who, on an airline trip to Mexico City to aid the poor, got the airline to donate the cost of her in-flight meal, which she did not intend to eat, then she got passengers to do the same, and the crew. At the end of the flight, she then asked for the meals back so they could be given to the poor, then negotiated the loan of an airline truck to deliver them to the ghettos. Now that's what I call *chutzpah*.

Chutzpah, guile, shrewdness, craftiness, said Jesus, are noble enterprise when they serve the highest good. Biblical Israel prized craftiness, even trickery. They loved it in their own heroes and respected it in their enemies. The Old Testament is full of examples. There is a wonderful story in Joshua about the Gibeonites who feared the conquering Israelites. So the people of Gibeon, dressed in old rags, and with worn out water skins and sandals, came to Joshua saying they had come on a great journey from a distant land, and would the Israelites take them in as their slaves and in return protect them. Israel fell for it and took them in. When Joshua discovered the ruse the Israelites were so enamored with the trick that they promised the Gibeonites no harm. In another story, Jacob dupes his older twin, Esau, out of the birthright with a bowl of lentil stew, then tricks him again out of his father's blessing and goes on to become the founder of the twelve tribes, through his sons. With only 300 men Gideon routed a huge invading army with a masterful piece of shrewd psychological warfare. The books of Genesis and Judges are filled with stories of people who outwit their unscrupulous neighbors and thereby complete God's purpose through mental stealth and imagination. Jesus, too, repeatedly uses mental stealth to lead the Pharisees into their own traps. Remember how they wanted to entrap the Lord into a confrontation with the Roman tax authorities. How Jesus took a coin and said “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” And they were silenced.

It pays benefits to the Kingdom of God for us to use our “smarts.” The Shema, which we have mentioned from time to time, that great daily prayer of the Jews, says that we are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul strength and *mind*. The mind is indeed a terrible thing to waste.

The point of this perennially tricky parable of the devious steward comes through in verse 8: “For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” Christians, Jesus says, have to get smart, becoming as street wise and savvy in dealing with the world as are the children of darkness, the evil people. Jesus is not condoning evil to gain a good, but outsmarting the bad guys.

To interpret our parable, however, we have to understand the context of its times, as Jesus' audience would have. Understanding one's place in society was everything. There was no health care, pension, 501K plan. Where one lived, worked and raised a family were marked indelibly by fate, and seldom changed. -Nor, typically, did one's *station* in life. To lose respect, and one's place in society were disastrous for oneself and family.

So, when the master is told that his manager is cooking the books, the manager is mortified. He is fired on the spot and told to turn in the accounts. He does not jail the servant or even scold him. In an act of extraordinary generosity for that culture, he simply dismisses him to his own fate and says, “bring me the books.” Now, a manager or steward always had authority to act for the master, to make deals, determine commissions, set prices, and so on. His word was his boss's word. But his powers were stripped at the moment he was fired. So, very quickly before word gets out on the street that he is fired, the manager calls in the debtors and without explanation reduces what are in fact very large debts. Did you catch the urgency in the wording to the “sit down quickly, and make it fifty.... eighty.”

Now the steward has done a number of clever things, acting with the presumed authority of the master, and without explanation, he has enlarged the esteem of the master tremendously in the eyes of the debtors. He has given the debtors a taste of the generosity and grace that has just moments before come to him. He had been given the freedom to set prices and commissions, and he has exercised the freedom to reduce them.

The master, meanwhile, like all in his culture, thrives on the high esteem in which he is held by his tenants. To be treated with respect, to be honored, was incredibly prized. Not only, would the master now be applauded in the community for his great charity, but the manager would be similarly elevated in the eyes of the debtors. Should the master uphold the dismissal, even after learning of his own soaring esteem, the manager has made friends and security for himself and his family, the very thing he intended. The master knows he cannot renege on the reduced bills without incurring the wrath of the community. He would become a man who cannot be trusted, whose word, through his agent, the manager, is without value. So, the master praises the manager for his skill in generating so much good will and favor out of so much adversity, and the master forgoes the loss.

The single lesson that the parable holds up for us to emulate is the craft and artfulness of a man who is cornered, a man who can find nourishment in a stone. God wants people whose heart and mind are consumed with a passion for finding a way out of dark places, for the sake of the Kingdom. The parable, then, is not applauding dishonesty (even though the steward was acting on a knife edge of legality), but it applauds cleverness and quick thinking. It is quick thinking that improves the Master's standing, while committing him to a loss that he can well afford. He was, after all, a rich man, and riches cannot buy good esteem.

When you think about it, the church ought to be the most imaginative and creative institution on earth. We are, after all, sons and daughters of light, sons and daughters of the God whose creativity and imagination is everywhere abounding. You might be able to justify mediocrity anywhere on earth, but not in the church. God sent the very best in his son, and he hopes for no less in us.

Let me offer you a story as an example. Centuries ago there lived in the city of London an avaricious old money lender to whom a merchant owed a great sum of money. When the merchant's business fell on hard times the money lender decided to turn the screws and he proposed a vile bargain. He would cancel the debt in its entirety but would demand instead the hand of the merchant's beautiful young daughter in marriage. If the merchant refused and could not pay the debt on the spot, the money lender would have him thrown into the debtors prison where he would be left to rot. Naturally, the merchant was horrified at the prospect of either choice, but then the money lender piously offered a way out of the debt. He would take two pebbles, one black and the other white and place them in a bag. Then the merchant's daughter would draw one out. If she drew out a white pebble both she and the merchant would be free and the debt would be canceled. If, on the other hand, she drew out the black pebble, then she would become the old miser's wife, but the debt would still be canceled. If she refused to do either, the father would rot in jail and she would be left to starve.

Reluctantly the merchant and his young daughter agreed to the test and at the appointed time the three of them gathered on the path outside the home of the money lender. The old man showed them a black velvet bag, clearly empty, then stooped to the pebbled path to get two stones. With horror the young girl's bright eyes saw him pick up not one white and one black pebble, but instead, giving only the appearance of picking a white stone he palmed instead two black pebbles in his hand which he thrust with a malicious grin into the dark bag. Then he invited her to place her hand into the bag and choose one of the stones. She was horrified. If she unveiled his treachery she would no doubt only stir up his wrath and the situation would be worse than before. If she chose either one of the black stones in the bag she would be consigning herself to a horrible fate. It was at that moment that she concocted a quick plan. Slipping her young fingers into the bag she retrieved a single stone, then as her hand slipped out of the bag, in an instant, in the void between herself and the old money lender, she let it fall to the path where it was immediately lost in the multitude of light and dark stones.

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry," she feigned, "I was so nervous. But if you look in the bag and see what color is left you will be able to tell what color was the one that I chose."

Now, was she dishonest, or simply cleverer than an agent of darkness?

Amen.