

**ONLY A SAVIOR LIKE JESUS COULD LOVE PEOPLE LIKE US; LUKE 16:1-13;
SEPTEMBER 18, 2016; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Pithy little parable Jesus gives us today – widely considered one of the most, if not *the most* difficult of Jesus' sayings. In case you were wondering, yes, he really did tell this story. Even the Jesus Seminar who doesn't believe much about Jesus believes he told this shocking little tale; and they believe it partly because it is so shocking and not like anything we would expect him to say –

You know, things like the pleasant sounding, rational statements in verses 10-13: “whoever is faithful in a little is faithful in much; no one can serve two masters” and so on. These were probably Luke's glosses on the original parable to give his readers a head start in understanding it.

Why would they need a head start? Well, the parable is so outrageous. It offends our Christian principles. We don't come here to have swindlers and thieves help up as model disciples.

In fact, if it weren't for our Presbyterian decorum and reserve I might wonder about *your morality* this morning – the way you just sat there while Bill read the text; I mean no one got up to leave, or shouted shame for celebrating this crook.

OK, maybe it was a late Saturday night and you were catching up on your sleep while he was reading or maybe you couldn't believe your ears or thought he was reading from some rogue bible; so let me tell the story again: Did you hear the one about the rich man who heard that his manager was stealing from the company? Rich man calls the thief in for a meeting.

“Show me the books, you alleged thief!” The manager responds, “The books, ah, er, sure. Just give me a few...notations.” The manager thinks to himself, “I'm too proud to beg and too lazy for honest labor. This is no time to cut back my lifestyle.” And the swindle begins.

The crook calls in some of the company's biggest customers. “How much to you owe the company? A thousand? Let me drop a zero. Now it's a hundred. How do ya like them numbers?” To another, he says, “Four million! Well look at this. It appears that, thanks to my efforts, you owe only four hundred!”

Huge sums are written off so that when the manager gets fired he can pay a visit to his boss's former debtors and say, “Remember me? By the way, I'm looking for a job – anything with a corner office will do.”

The next day the manager presents the ledger. You can see where he's scratched through, erased, rewritten and thoroughly cooked the books. It's an outrageous swindle. And the owner of the company says, “Why you, you *business genius* you! I wish all the priggish sons-o-light in this company showed as much initiative, wisdom and commercial creativity! You're one shrewd operator! I'm giving you a promotion!” There it is – scandal rewarded! Some people have said Luke's gospel should be wrapped in a cellophane cover and placed on a high shelf out of the reach of children. Sleazy stuff! And no disclaimer from Jesus. He just lets it sink in like a disturbing scene from a Tarantino movie.

So what's going on here? I can tell you one commentator had the humility to encourage the reader to consult many other sources because there is so much disagreement about what the parable means. Which I did and, indeed, all of the four commentaries had very different interpretations of the parable.

This is what I love about the bible; it resists being shoehorned into little boxes and categories of meaning. It is why the Jews in general and the rabbis in particular are so contentious and willing to engage in debate – *what does the sacred text mean?* If you think it means just one thing you're already heading down the wrong path, if not avoiding its deeper truths.

The minute we boil the bible down to a list of easily swallowed spiritual bromides is the minute we can throw it out with all the other stale and moldy once-clever platitudes we've been keeping at the back of our theological refrigerators.

You'll be glad to know I did run across one idea that seemed to resonate with some degree of authenticity. There is in every culture, including Jewish culture, the tradition of the trickster – the border-crosser, the one who breaks the rules and disrupts life so that life gets re-established on a new basis.

Tricksters can be cunning or foolish or both; they are usually male and fond of breaking the rules; from Greek to African to native American to biblical mythology the tradition of the trickster links the culture, through the irrational and irreverent, to the holy and sacred which cannot be contained or tamed by obvious virtues like hard work, respect and honorable conduct.

Jacob is the most prominent of the biblical tricksters; he tricks Esau, his father Isaac and his father-in-law Laban in ways that would have been immoral by conventional standards; he cheats and swindles others to gain material and social advantage he is not entitled to. Yet, the biblical story-teller clearly takes his side and the reader is invited to laugh and admire Jacob's ingenuity and contemplate a God who seems to put twists and turns, if not detours in our path to enlightenment and salvation.

And we might be laughing too today were this parable of the shrewd manager not so antithetical to our good middle class values of virtuous conduct and living. Even though we have found a literary genre for the kind of story Jesus tells today, there is still the question, "Why did he tell it?"

We come to church like customers grazing a spiritual salad bar; hunting for what we can get out of the music, the liturgy, the sermon; hoping some tasty morsel will satisfy our hunger to become a better person, give us strength to shoulder some burden, or the stamina to right some wrong.

But isn't it possible that Jesus also has an agenda for us today? Jesus' agenda might be different from ours; his agenda might not result in our coming away with a better image of ourselves – with clean books and orderly ledgers – so that whatever God or Order of The Universe weighs the scales of justice can find our behavior, in the end, free of wrong-doing.

Maybe Jesus' agenda is to send the message that he loves us right now, just the way we are; maybe he's telling us today "I'm not waiting until you get your books cleaned up and you are a certified 'better person' before I love you and take delight in you even when the best that can be said about you is that you are shrewd."

The novels of Frederick Buechner are inspired by such a God; his characters are very human, very real. Author Graham Greene's whiskey priest is a cowardly clergyman who shuns much of his duty as a minister of word and sacrament but nevertheless despite his flaws to deliver the grace of God and touch the lives of the people around him; or Leo Bebb, Buechner's own creation and protagonist in three of his novels is a clownish, slippery, very stained free-lance preacher who, in his un-reconstructed state, brings the hope of the gospel where it is most needed.

We are the broken, leaky vessels says St. Paul that God chooses to bring about the kingdom – so be it, says Luke today in his celebrating a wily white collar criminal. Here's another one!

In a way, you might say God has to put up with us; he gave us the freedom to choose what kind of people to be; did not pretend to have any trick up his sleeve or magic wand to transform us into little saints; but stuck to his promise to love us even when we demanded his death by execution; God places his bet on our transformation on love because love, in the end, is the only thing that can really change us deep down in the darkest crevices of our souls where our self-perceptions reside.

You've got to love a savior who let us nail him to a cross, so determined was he to love us *as we are* rather than as *who we wish we were*. Only a savior who had some appreciation, some genuine affection for 'people who belong to this world' could save people like us. Any other leader, prophet, sage would have reasonably abandoned us long ago.

The irony of being a church is that there is something about it, about organized religion – and this is what those who are not part of the church, especially millennials find distasteful – there's something about church that can mislead us into thinking that when Jesus says, "I've come to rescue sinners!" that he isn't actually talking about us.

Jesus and Luke understood that, which is why Jesus told stories about dishonest stewards and Luke makes the everyday, outcasts – tax collectors and sinners (remember from last week?) – and today a swindler, the heroes of his gospel.

It's a blind spot we have in the rear view mirror of our forward moving faith; and as we learned in driver's education – you have to turn around and look behind you, or more accurately, look inside yourself, to see what's there. But we often don't do that until we've had a collision or are about to have one.

Any church, to be alive, has to have some supply of folks for whom the outrageous, scandalous grace of God is still fresh in their minds, folks for whom the Christian faith is not the way they were brought up or folks who were cradle Christians but then crossed some line of moral rectitude or conduct that called into question everything they claimed they believed and valued.

If there's not someone in the congregation who can say, "I once was blind, but now I see..." or, "I can't believe that of all people to call, God called me..." then it's very difficult to preach a parable like today's scandalous parable from Luke 16.

Fred Buechner in his book *Peculiar Treasures* – a compendium of biblical characters – closes his section on Jacob this way:

“The lesson of his dream about the ladder and angels ascending to heaven was that the land he was standing on was to belong to him and his descendants and his descendants would one day become a great nation. Jacob didn't have to climb his ladder to bilk Heaven of the moon and stars because the moon and stars is what God and the angels were using the ladder to give to him for free.

Luckily for Jacob, God doesn't love people because of who they are but because of who God is. "It's on the house" is one way of saying it and it's "by grace" is another, just as it was by grace that it was Jacob of all people who became not only the father of the twelve tribes of Israel but the many times great grandfather of Jesus of Nazareth, and just as it was by grace that Jesus of Nazareth was born into this world at all.

That's the lesson today friends and that's the lesson above all others we are called to tell little James and all of our children – grace: it's the difference between living a life of gnawing hunger that never seems to be satisfied and a life of gratitude that give thanks for what it has.
Amen.