

**“Let’s make a deal...”, Luke 16:1-13 by Rev. Kim Leslie.
17th Sunday after Pentecost C, 9/24/2007**

Once there was a very wealthy businessman, a wholesaler and absentee landlord, who'd hired a property manager to handle his rent collections and other business affairs. Accusations were made that the manager was, at best, squandering his boss's money, at worst, ripping him off bigtime. One charge after another was leveled in a barrage of character assassination that branded the man at least an inept fool if not an outright embezzler. Without even bothering to look into the charges, the boss called his manager to his penthouse office and confronted him, "What's this I hear about you throwing my money away?" But he didn't give him a chance to answer. He just said, "Bring me your books so I can have them audited. You're fired!"

He seemed determined from the start to destroy the man's reputation. He even came right out and said, "If I have anything to say about it, you'll never work again in this town."

The fired manger thought to himself, "*Now* what am I going to do? I've lost my job. I'm not strong enough to dig ditches, I'm too ashamed to go hat in hand begging for charity. I'm too old for a career change. (Frankly, he'd gotten a bit soft while he was blowing his boss's money on the good life. The old fool was so rich the manager was wondered if he'd ever have missed the small fortune he'd run through so quickly if nobody'd snitched. Compared to the boss's Rolls, yacht and mansion in Palm Beach, his little perks, now long gone, were peanuts.) He thought about it, and then he said to himself, "I've got an idea! I know what I can do to guarantee I'll have some friends left and somebody that'll give me a place when the time comes."

One by one, he called up everybody who owed his boss anything, tenants and suppliers. He asked the first one, a restaurant owner, "How much do you owe my boss?" "A bill for 100 gallons of extra virgin olive oil." He said, "Hurry up, take your last statement and sit down and cross out 100 and write fifty." "O.K. she said," I can't complain about that." Then the manager asked another debtor, "How much?" "Fifteen hundred," was the answer. "O.K., take this I.O.U. and write nine-fifty." "O.K.! Tell your boss I sure appreciate getting a break like this. Our cash flow has been more of a trickle lately."

The plan couldn't have gone any more smoothly. Sure, he'd turn over the books, just as soon as he cooked them enough to cover his tracks. He couldn't keep from chuckling to himself. He'd gotten even with the rich old fool after all.

But the debtors were so grateful for what the manager did for them, they told his boss how much they appreciated his generosity. So now he knew the truth, *but* the boss could hardly tell anybody without showing himself up for the perfect patsy he'd been. He just soaked up the compliments, counted them as good P.R., and resigned himself to the fact that he'd been ripped off by one pretty slick con artist. So, when he ran into his former employee on the street, it was only a little bit grudgingly that he said, "I've got to hand it to you! You pulled off the scam like a pro. Finally, after I fired you, you went to work. So, tell me, why couldn't you have used your genius like that when you were still working for me?"

Now this is my version of the parable in Luke, but it's faithful to the original. But what kind of a story is this anyway? What kind of a crazy parable is it? It's an embarrassment. That's what it is. It's been the center of controversy and the source of confusion from the first century 'til now. Scholars have come up with all kinds of ways to decipher it, very few of them much more than poor attempts to explain it away. The proverbial sayings Luke follows it with don't really help. Maybe, it's even been suggested, this was included in the

Bible by mistake. Maybe it wasn't one of Jesus' parables. But why would anybody include *this* parable? Its strangeness is a testimony to its authenticity. Nobody would make up something like this. It's so strange it has to be real.

But how could Jesus tell a story like this? There are no good guys, no hero. So whose example are we supposed to follow? What's Jesus telling us – to act like a criminal?

This is one of two or three of the most disturbing, confusing parables. There's no easy way to tame it and render it harmless by familiarity, no way to wrap it up neatly, saying, "And that's the moral of the story." Instead, it makes us think, and we don't always come to church expecting to do that, do we?

Let's look at the story again carefully. First off, we know it's about a very rich man. Even if we weren't told, we'd know he's rich because he has a full-time manager to take care of his affairs.

Most of us wouldn't expect to have a lot of sympathy for a filthy rich absentee landlord, would we? He doesn't have to answer to anybody, and so he can fire a man with a snap of the fingers, no skin off his back, right? And this one lives up to the stereotype. He sides with the accusers without checking out the truth of the accusations. He doesn't give his manager even half a chance to explain or defend himself.ⁱ

So, it's no surprise we find ourselves sympathizing with the manager, the underdog, a man accused, maybe unjustly, by mere rumor and innuendo by unnamed parties, denied his day in court, out of a job and up a creek without a paddle.

Isn't this one of those situations, like others we can think of, where a little creative dishonesty seems perfectly justified?

A little creative thinking, a little imagination can go a long way when you're in a jam. Remember the movie *The Sting*? How Paul Newman and Robert Redford scammed the bad guys, turning the tables on the numbers racketeers? We don't have any scruples about rooting for the little guy getting even with the big bad boss, do we?

"When Joseph Talese was an apprentice tailor in Maida, Italy he made a terrible mistake. His hand slipped and he accidentally cut a slit in the trouser leg of a suit being made for the head of a Mafia crime family. Disaster loomed. The proud and vengeful Mafia chieftain might very well exact a terrible price for his disappointment. Even worse, there was not enough material to craft new pants.

As siesta time approached, the tailor for whom Talese worked closed the shop and ordered his assistants to pray for help with this frightening situation. In due course came inspiration: the tailor cut an identical slit in the other trouser leg and sewed up both with an elaborate bird-shaped design. When the astonished mafioso tried on his new suit, the tailor explained that wing-tipped knees were the latest fashion in the great capitals of the world. As proof, he pointed to his assistants: each of [them] now wore trousers with the identical sewn design. The don left, happily in style.ⁱⁱ

A little creative thinking, a little imagination can go a long way when you're in a jam. But maybe we've got some nagging doubts about this manager when he says he's not strong enough to dig ditches and too ashamed to beg. Maybe, we begin to wonder, just maybe this guy is just plain lazy and isn't going to be the hero. But then he begins to plot his revenge, and he's won us back. We'd like to see him get even. We'd like to see that

rich fool get a taste of his own medicine, wouldn't we? We could rationalize something like that against a character like his boss, couldn't we? Don't get mad, get even.

"Phyllis Cook works in New Haven, Connecticut, with elderly victims of arthritis. She is a therapist for people with arthritis. So maybe that was why, when [she and now Bishop Will Willimon] were visiting in New York City, going to the opera... and [they] stopped in this little stand-up, one-room diner to get a hot dog, Phyllis did what she did. While [they] were standing there at the counter, this old lady - humped over, stooped, wrapped up all over in faded, worn woolens - hobbled in.

'Shut the door,' called the woman working behind the counter.

'Whata you wan?' she asked the old lady. She mumbled something about a hot dog. A hot dog was thrust before her. For the longest time she fumbled with a pocketful of small change until she found just enough to pay. Before eating the hot dog, she tried to put some mustard on it. But her hands, palsied, shook so that she got some of the mustard on the counter. The disgusted person on the other side said, 'Look at the mess you've made. Go on. Just get out of here. Go!'

The old lady responded with pleading eyes.

'You heard me, go.'

Phyllis, looking on, moved over to the old lady and smiled. 'Excuse me,' said Phyllis to her, 'can I borrow the mustard?' Then Phyllis, staring right at the person on the other side of the counter, before the astonished eyes of the old lady, took that mustard, poured it all over the counter, saying to the person on the other side, 'Don't you ever speak like that again to your elders or I will do to you what I just did to the counter.'

Taking the old lady by the arm, they left in great dignity. You would like Phyllis.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

We'd like to see the old fool get a taste of his own medicine. But then it begins to look like his boss was right about this guy all along. He's got no scruples at all. The boss may have it coming himself, but this guy's no Robin Hood, no bandit champion of the poor. He's looking out for number one and nobody else. He's a lazy, selfish cheat and liar. And *he's the one we were rooting for?* Nice people like us?^v

So, somewhat disillusioned with our hero, but not fond of his boss, either, we kind of wait for the other shoe to drop. When the boss finds out what he's done, this guy is going to pay for it, isn't he? Well, isn't he? Well..., actually. No, he's not. The boss has been had, but does he call the cops? No, for crying out loud! He praises the crook for being so shrewd!

There's nobody left for us good guys and gals to identify with, is there? No hero. No honest person in sight. So what's the moral of the story? What's the point of the parable?

New Testament scholar Dan Via says a parable is like a window. We look through it and see all sorts of scoundrels doing all kinds of outrageous things. But, sometimes, we also see our own reflection.^v Sometimes we go along for the ride when the good guys are going out to get even. Sometimes, he says, we allow ourselves to go on a moral holiday,^{vi} rationalizing that the bad guys have it coming even when the good guys begin to look and act an awful lot like bad guys.

What's hard to believe is that Jesus is right there with us. We expect him to tie it all up, make sense of it for us, and be sure the bad guys get their just desserts. Instead he sings the praises of the shrewd swindler. What're we supposed to do with that?

Well, the parable's kind of like one Hans Hillerbrand tells “...a story of a great rabbi, who, when told by some of his students that one of [the rabbi's] friends had been arrested for burglary, the rabbi said, 'My friend is a very great teacher.'

'How can that be?' asked his students.

'Look at my friend the burglar,' says the rabbi, 'Every day he manages to teach me something, even in this. When we are awake and sleeping, he is busy working. When others go about what they do chattering aimlessly, he is quiet and adept. When others are busy locking doors, he skillfully knows how to open them. My friend is a true artist and teacher.'^{vii}

A true artist and teacher? Well, yeah, I suppose, in a way, he is. And the dishonest manager, outrageous as his behavior is, can teach us a few things, too.^{viii}

You may remember that Bill Maher, who used to host the TV show “Politically Incorrect,” got in trouble after 9/11 for saying something *very* politically incorrect – something about firing missiles from a remote switch being cowardly and about the hijackers having courage and dedication. He got jumped on by people who thought he was saying the men and women in the armed forces are cowards, something he emphasized he didn't say or mean. I don't remember what his critics said about his admiration for the terrorists' commitment and bravery..... but didn't he have a point? No matter how despicable and incomprehensible suicide bombers are, how many of us would have the resolve and courage to go on a mission of certain death for what we believe in?

At its simplest, Jesus' parable is about a man who, facing disgrace, unemployment, maybe prison time, doesn't panic, isn't immobilized with fear, doesn't go into denial, doesn't whimper, doesn't give up, doesn't resign himself to the hand fate's dealt him.^{ix}

Instead, he sees what's in the cards and moves quickly to get himself a better deal by hook or by crook. He sees the punch coming, and ducks just in time to stay on his feet. He faces reality and moves quickly to manipulate it to his own advantage.

Would we be that resourceful? Probably not, not most of us. Got downsized? Got fired? Do you chalk it up to the changing market or corporate greed, or do you start doubting your own worth? Do you go out and look for a job first thing in the morning or resign yourself to an unemployment check and go into an understandable depression? Do you do some creative thinking about marketable skills or assume your career life's over for good?

You notice a change in your body. What do you do about it? I can't count the number of people I've known or heard about who wouldn't go to the doctor to save their life because they were afraid it might be the big "C", so they roll over and play dead instead of going for the kind of early diagnosis, treatment and aggressive intervention that's proving more and more successful. I guess they just believe that you're number's just up when it's up and throw in the towel and, doing that, they practically guarantee their worst fears *will* come true.

We're floored by the almost unimaginable crimes people fall victim to, but we throw up our hands in helpless resignation. [A handful of terrorists filled with a hatred we haven't got a clue about turned a beautiful morning into an unimaginable tragedy, and nothing seems the same anymore.] The guy next door screams obscenities and throws stuff at his wife and kids. The punk down the block needs an adult role model. Do we make a commitment that might be part of a solution, or do we offer the excuse that one person can't really make a difference?^x

When life threatens to undo us, what do we do? Do we keep moving or let ourselves be overwhelmed? Do we get on our feet or just lay down? Do we jump in all over again or withdraw into ourselves? Do we swim or go under? Do we attack or circle the wagons? Do we go on the offensive or take a defensive stand? Do we lash out at the nearest scapegoat or rise above our enemies' tactics? Do we live in fear and sacrifice our freedom or innocent lives for security or do we live bravely as we always have? Do we make lemonade or gripe about all the lemons life's given us?

Maybe Jesus is saying this is no way to live. If somebody like that unscrupulous manager's got the good sense and quick wit to keep his head above water, then how much more should we be able to do the same if we've got the scruples to do right.^{xi}

There's no virtue in being naive and ignorant, and nothing wrong with being smart and shrewd. Like the poster we put up in one church I served, "Jesus died to take away your sins, not your mind."^{xii}

The shrewd manager didn't like the look of the future he saw coming, but for him, the future wasn't fixed; it still had other possibilities. So he wheeled and dealt with the faith that something good could come out of it all, and it did.^{xiii}

Unlike those dangerously, tragically misguided people who say that what happened on September 11 was God's will, Jesus knew, as he said, that the sun shines and the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Evil people get away with murder and bad things happen to good people. It happens, but not because God ever meant it to be this way. What counts is what we *do* when it happens. Do we resign ourselves to fate or do we make plans?

What the manager had that's in short supply with us is confidence - not confidence in ourselves or our cleverness, or bravado or national pride, but confidence that God's future for us isn't subject to the limitations we put on it, but is open to all kinds of possibilities.

Jesus didn't die helpless, resigned to a hopeless fate; he went willingly to his death with the confidence that if anyone could bring something good out of it God would.

In church, like business and life, people come, people go. Attendance is up, attendance down. Income is up, income is down. Bills go up, bills go on. Do we cut back and cut back, play the "ain't it awful" game, throw in the towel, or do we put our trust in God's future?

"A business person... caught wind of a rumor, a rather well-substantiated rumor that a major manufacturing company was going to build a huge new plant on the outskirts of his little town. Knowing that, he immediately went out, borrowed money, began wheeling and dealing, buying up properties, and starting new developments all in anticipation of a bright economic future for the town.

"To those who observed him, those who did not know what the future held, his actions seemed irrational and foolhardy.

"Later, when the announcement came that a factory would indeed be built in the town the wisdom and prudence of his actions became clear for all to see. He knew something about the future, something that gave him confidence in the future, that the others did not know."^{xiv}

May God bless us with that kind of faith.

ⁱBernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 262.

ⁱⁱ*Time* February 10, 1992, 73, from the book *Unto His Sons* by Gay Talese, quoted in *Dynamic Preaching* 10:9 September 1995, 25.

ⁱⁱⁱWilliam H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 23:3 July, August, September 1995, 54.

^{iv}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 23:3 July, August, September 1995, 52.

^vWilliam H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 23:3 July, August, September 1995, 53.

^{vi}Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable*, 263.

^{vii}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 26:3 July, August, September 1998, 49.

^{viii}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 26:3 July, August, September 1998, 49.

^{ix}Cf. William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 26:3 July, August, September 1998, 49.

^xCf. William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 26:3 July, August, September 1998, 49.

^{xi}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 26:3 July, August, September 1998, 49.

^{xii}The Ad Campaign

^{xiii}Cf. William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 26:3 July, August, September 1998, 49.

^{xiv}William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 26:3 July, August, September 1998, 50.