

“Cooking the Books”  
A sermon preached by  
Dean L. Francis  
First United Methodist Church of Evanston  
September 18, 2016

**Luke 16:1-13**

*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. <sup>2</sup>So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ <sup>5</sup>So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ <sup>6</sup>He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ <sup>7</sup>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.’ <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>“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. <sup>11</sup>If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup>And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? <sup>13</sup>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.”*

Phyllis Tickle calls it “The most difficult parable of them all.” David Lose calls it “The most confusing parable.” Either way you slice it, pulpits are filled with lectionary preachers this morning wishing they had abandoned this one and decided to preach on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm instead. In an election cycle where we are constantly hearing about “crooked Hillary” and “bankrupt Donald,” the story about an outright crooked employee whose boss seems to approve of him being so devious is a pretty tempting target for a sermon that addresses the political discourse (or lack thereof) in our Presidential election cycle. Perhaps like most of the elections taking place in our nation recently, everyone seems flawed in this story: the manager who is cooking the books, the debtors who are willing to cheat the owner, and even the owner himself, who praises his manager for such shrewd behavior. The whole thing is downright embarrassing, certainly not a bedtime story that you’d want to tell your children.

So before we try to convince ourselves that the Bible is filled with only stories of goodness and light, let's be clear about one thing: the Bible as a whole is often embarrassing. Don't even get me started about its subjugation of women or slaves or children. But what I'm talking about, what I'm embarrassed about this morning, is the fact that according to the Bible, David Buttrick writes, God seems to favor crooks. Cain, who kills off his brother Able; Jacob (the original birther), who cheats his older brother out of his inheritance; David, who has more sexual exploits than...oh that's just too easy. You fill in the blank. And yet in all of these and many more cases, God seems to favor these guys. Maybe Mark Twain was right when he wrote that *as far as he could tell the Bible was a spectacular collection of liars, cheats, adulterers, murderers, con artists, megalomaniacs, all of whom seemed to be loved by God.*<sup>1</sup> Now that's embarrassing.

So the fact that God might be able to work through despicable characters wouldn't have been new to Jesus' listeners. They knew these various Hebrew stories, and they might have even expected it. They also knew that there was all kinds of double dealing going on in this scenario. Hebrew law forbade interest being charged on a fellow Jew's debt, but to get around that they simply used commodities like oil or wheat. The Romans didn't have this kind of law, so cheating the poor and illiterate landowners with taxes and loans was commonplace. All across Israel, peasants were losing their land to debt and taxes. So the steward's behavior would have seemed like a normal business plan. And perhaps what Jesus is saying is that in desperate times shrewdness becomes an essential Christian virtue.

Because it's hard to survive on your own in a subprime, day trading world of high interest rates and predatory lending, and those payday loan stores with lively flashing neon signs and cast iron bars over windows, looking like a casino boat, jailhouse, or asylum. And bad credit to the guy who can't pay for his ambulance ride to the hospital after taking too many pills because the factory shut down, only to be replaced by a strip mall selling zebra striped iPhone covers.

So, in this kind of world, who can blame a manager for being a little shrewd, especially when shrewdness leads to mercy? He's making new friends, albeit through dishonest means. But a friend is a friend, and the burden of a debt lifted is a special kind of grace.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p. 212

In his commentary on this passage, Justo Gonzalez writes that “this is a parable of stewardship. Whatever we now have is no more than a temporary management. We have all been given notice. And the parable invites us to be like this steward, who was ready even to cheat the present for the sake of the new order he knew was coming.”<sup>2</sup> We live in a time when the old order is passing away.

Issues like climate change, marriage equality, and the black lives matter movement all point toward a changing reality for our country and our world. As Christians we are charged to understand our role as stewards not of the past, but of the future. Sometimes that means challenging and even cheating the principalities and powers that now call all the shots. God is always doing a new thing, and our task is often to make a way for that to happen. May we do so.  
AMEN

---

<sup>2</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *Luke*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 192