

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 18, 2016

“There’s Something About Con Men.”

Luke 16:1-15

There’s an old story that many of you may know about a young man in Montana who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However, when the next day arrived, the farmer reneged on his promise. “I’m afraid the horse has died,” he said. The young man said, “Well, then give me my money back.” The farmer said, “Can’t do that. I spent it already.” The young man thought for a moment and said, “Ok, then, just bring me the dead horse.” The farmer asked, “What are you going to do with the dead horse?” The young man said, “I’m going to raffle it off.” The farmer, “You can’t raffle off a dead horse!” To that the young man said, “Sure I can. Watch me. I just won’t tell anybody he’s dead.” A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked, “What happened with that dead horse?” The young man said, “I raffled him off. I sold 500 tickets at two dollars apiece and made a profit of \$998...” The farmer, “Didn’t anyone complain?” “Just the guy who won. So I gave him his two dollars back.”

Now there’s an enterprising young man. We might even call him something of a con man. There’s something about a con man that captures the imagination.

Jesus one told a parable about a man with that kind of disposition. He, too, was something of a con man. Most of you know the story quite well.

Read the Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

This is a story no one preaches, because it is a story no one understands. Many people wonder if Jesus really told it. So let’s have at it.

This guy’s ethics were certainly out of whack, but his sense of survival was kicking in at full speed. He used his privileged position to buy himself some friends so that he would have somewhere to turn to when he was out of a job. He was taking a risk. The risk that his boss would have him thrown in jail. That’s what should have happened, of course. But this is Jesus’ parable, and, let’s face it, Jesus sometimes thought outside the box. Listen to how Jesus ended this little tale.

“The master praised the crooked manager! 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 bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

Whoa! Did we hear right? The master praised the crooked manager? In most of Jesus’ parables, the manager represents God. What does this mean? Does God like con men? That would be outrageous. We glamorize con-men, but the truth is they take advantage of the weak and unsuspecting people. I suspect God despises con men and con women. However, for more than 2000 years conscientious people of faith have struggled with this parable which is exactly what Christ intended. Jesus wants us to puzzle over his teachings. He wants us to stretch our minds and our spirits. This is how we grow. Let’s face it, many people have a superficial faith to which they have never given more than a couple minutes of thought in their entire lives.

There are some possible reasons why the master commended the dishonest manager in Jesus’ story. First of all, Jesus liked people of action. In the parable of the Good Samaritan what makes this Samaritan good? Did he keep all the commandments? Who knows? Did he subscribe to all the articles of orthodox faith? Nope. The fact that he was a Samaritan means that he was slightly outside the mainstream of faith. What made him good? He saw a person in need and he helped him.

Notice a priest walked by. You don’t get any holier than that, but what did he do? That’s right he kept right on walking. A teacher of the law came by, the pillar of respectability. What did he do? Right, absolutely nothing. But this despised Samaritan saw a man who needed help and he was moved to action. Jesus likes people of action.

Jesus has enough handwringers in the world. You know what I’m talking about. People who look at the world’s problems and say, “Dear me, somebody ought to do something.” Well, yes they should. Let me rephrase this, yes, WE should. There are times that call for immediate action. What do we do? We analyze, we have meetings til the cows come home, we worry what the congregation would say, we don’t want to offend anyone, so we do nothing. And so we let an opportunity pass. The old status quo.

Often our lives are dominated by fear, fear of what other people will think of us, fear of rejection, fear of making a mistake. So we move through life making ourselves as invisible as we can, doing as little as we can. Not because we are bad, we are simply afraid. The dishonest manager was afraid, too. He was losing his job. By his own admission, he wasn’t

strong enough to dig and he was ashamed to beg. What was he going to do? He hatched himself a plan. He would call his master's debtors and discount their debts, thereby making friends for himself that might do him a favor in return when he was out on the streets. Jesus praised him for taking action.

There are some people who won't even act in their own behalf! Have you noticed that? Somebody or something outside themselves has to motivate them to get into action.

Some of you have seen that happen to people. They are faced with a difficult situation and they become paralyzed with fear and uncertainty. That usually leads to bitterness and anger. There are some people who, for whatever reason, become defeated and refuse to act in their own behalf.

The amazing thing is how religious some of these people are. I may sound a little cruel here, but we are dealing with a deep spiritual problem.

You realize, of course, that one reason people come to religion is that they are afraid. Religion helps them deal with a stressful world. So, when some people have a problem they pray...and they pray...and they pray some more. And they wait...and they wait...and they wait some more. And all the while they're being very religious. The problem is that at the same time they are praying and waiting, God is also waiting, waiting for them to do something about their own situation.

Please don't misunderstand. God wants us to pray when we are in a difficult situation, but God also wants us to act. Pick up the phone. Enlist the help of family or a friend. Learn some new skills. Don't sit there passively and expect someone else to rescue you.

Jesus says something interesting at the end of this little parable. He praised the crooked manager. And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Jesus understood how the real world operates. He knew that sometimes even scoundrels are successful. Not because they are smarter or more talented, but because they are opportunistic. They are not held back by their fears. They are not held back by their doubts. They have learned to be self-reliant and self-motivated.

We have a phrase that's not heard much anymore. Have you ever heard someone say, "He worked like the dickens?" The "dickens" is another name for Satan. In fact, you may hear someone say, "He worked like the devil to get it done." The implication is that the devil is always busy seeking to achieve his wicked ends. He never misses an opportunity to tempt, to discourage, to embitter.

Well, there's a little truth in that. I guarantee you that if you hit a rough patch in the road, and you sit around feeling sorry for yourself, the tempter will move in quickly and work like the dickens to cause you to quit trying.

Jesus praised the dishonest manager because he did not give in to his fears. He reached out and made friends who would help him when he was out on the street. Jesus obviously would not approve of his methods, but that's another parable. Here his purpose is to spotlight the dishonest man's resolve. He was in a predicament and he took action. And Jesus praised him. And that is what Jesus wants us to do as well. Don't get discouraged. Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself. Pray, yes, in all circumstances, but if there is something you can do for yourself, do it, and God will bless your effort.

It's not in scripture that God helps those who help themselves. This saying is usually attributed to Ben Franklin. He quoted it in Poor Richard's Almanac 1757.

The saying is only partially true at best. God helps all those who call upon his name, not just the highly motivated. But God will not do for us what we can do for ourselves. If God constantly worked to solve all our problems for us, we would remain forever emotionally and spiritually immature.

Got a problem? Here's the answer. Pray and work. God likes us to pray, but he also likes people of action. Pray and work. Don't attempt one without the other.