

Needed: Drastic Action

Luke 16:1-13

September 23, 2007

I don't know how many of you have ever been fired from a job, but I have. It is not a pleasant experience. In January of 1978, during my first year of seminary, I was hired by North Presbyterian Church in Denver to be their Youth Director. The previous guy was moving back home to Ohio.

I should have known from the outset that this was going to be a tough place. At that time, the Presbyterian Church was embroiled in controversy over the issue of the ordination of homosexuals. As it so happened, the professor of Christian ethics at my seminary was a Presbyterian and had recently written an article for one of their national publications in which he argued for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the church. That hit the news big-time and he was featured in both the Denver Post and the Rocky Mountain News.

During my interview at the church, one of the members of the committee questioned my faith and wondered how I could be a Christian and still attend this seminary. That member's negative vote didn't cost me the job – yet – but it went downhill from there. I began that position with a whole lot of suspicion and baggage that I didn't deserve, yet had to carry.

However unfair that might have been, I was finally fired after a year for performance related issues which, I probably deserved. The guy I followed was an honestly great youth pastor. He loved kids, was incredibly outgoing, could talk to anybody at any time, and really related well with all ages of people.

You've known me now for a little over three years and you know how introverted I am. You know how difficult I sometimes find it to just sit and chat. I don't chat very well. I don't hold hands very well. That is something with which I have struggled all the years of my ministry. On this job in Denver, I honestly couldn't measure up to the expectations that the church had for me. They had a need for somebody like the guy that just left. I didn't and couldn't measure up. I honestly understood why they had to let me go.

The senior pastor was a very gracious and kind man. He secured a month's severance pay for me and wished me well in my remaining years in school and my future ministry. But that didn't make any of it easy to take. I was depressed. I was worried because I was getting academic credit for this job, and now I would not be able to complete the requirements for my field education. I wondered if I had made a mistake coming to seminary in the first place. It's tough to get fired.

That is the situation in which the manager in the parable for today found himself. He had some real performance related issues that required some drastic action on the part of his employer. Of all the parables in the gospel, this one is perhaps the most difficult to understand. One commentator I read this week said that this parable has about as many interpretations as there are interpreters. The difficulty revolves around the discomfort of Jesus seeming to praise dishonesty.

Part of the problem stems from the difficulty of deciding exactly where the parable ends. If it ends at verse 7 – “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’” - then verse 8 would be Jesus talking.

Verse 8 says, “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.” If that verse is the end of the parable, then it would be the rich man, the manager’s boss, who is talking.

The biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, who I mentioned in last week’s message, believes that verse 8 is Jesus talking. Apparently however, there is more of a consensus that verse 8 is the rich man talking. That way, we don’t have the problem of having Jesus directly praising the dishonest servant.

Here’s what happens. The manager for the operations of a rich farmer was found to be squandering his boss’s resources. The boss called him to account and asked for a financial statement. The dishonest manager knew that he had been caught and had to figure out a way to save himself from his predicament. He didn’t know what he would do without this job because he wasn’t strong enough to dig and was too proud to beg.

So he called in the master’s debtors and significantly reduced their bills, figuring that they would be grateful enough to give him a job if and when he needed one. And he was commended for his shrewdness.

Let me dig a little bit for a minute. My daughter bought a new car back in June. You all know how that works. On the final document, there is listed the sale price, the sales tax, and the interest. We know that it was the practice of lenders in the age of Jesus to list just one price which would have all of the interest and product markup included. So when the manager reduced the amounts to be paid by the debtors, he was probably cutting out the profit margin and the interest.

The manager said that he wanted to get in the good graces of his master’s debtors so that they might give him a job when he lost his. But there is perhaps another motive at work here. By

reducing the amount due, the debtors would have been pleasantly surprised, and so the master's reputation for fairness, generosity, and piety would have been enhanced.

If this were the case, then dismissing the manager would have been seen as an act of disloyalty. That is something that the master would not have wanted. So by the end of the parable, the manager is back in the good graces of his boss, his position is secured, and he is enjoying his reversal of fortune.

Then the point is made that the people of God would be well advised to use the resources at their disposal to further the kingdom of God. If people outside the kingdom can use their ingenuity in such a way as to further their own cause, why can't the people of God use their imagination to spread the work of the reign of God?

There was a mafia godfather who found out that his bookkeeper has stolen several million dollars from him. It so happened that the bookkeeper was deaf. They thought that, being deaf, he would never hear anything about which he could testify in court.

The godfather took his attorney with him to confront the bookkeeper because the attorney knew sign language. He asked the bookkeeper where his money was. Using sign language, he told the attorney that he didn't know anything.

The godfather pulled out a gun, put it against the bookkeeper's head, and told the attorney to ask him again. The attorney signs to the bookkeeper that the godfather is going to kill him if he doesn't tell him where the money is. "Ok," he says, "The money is in a brown suitcase buried behind the shed in my brother's backyard."

The godfather said to the attorney, "Well, what did he say?" The attorney said, "He says that you don't have the guts to pull the trigger."

There were two accountants who were in a bank together when armed men burst in the door. They first cleaned out the cash drawers of the tellers and then lined up all the people demanding wallets, watches, rings, and other valuables. While this was going on, one accountant slipped something into the other accountant's hand. "What is that?" he asked. "It's the fifty bucks I owe you."

Why can't we all be that smart when it comes to matters pertaining to the Kingdom of God?

The problem with this parable is that there are so many different interpretations, that if you read different commentators, you might come to believe that nobody really knows anything. But three things stand out for me.

Jesus says, "...for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." It sounds like Jesus was telling his followers that they should not copy the dishonesty of the manager, but they should copy his shrewdness. The problem here however, is that the word for "shrewd" in Greek is the same word that is used to describe the behavior of the snake in the Garden of Eden. I'm not sure that's what Jesus wanted to commend.

Secondly, Jesus says, "...make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." It sounds like he is encouraging his followers to use money for good purposes so that they can earn a place in heaven. The problem with that is that it sounds an awful lot like works righteousness, and that was one of the major issues of the Protestant Reformation. We Protestants thought we had that settled about five hundred years ago.

Thirdly, we read, "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." That doesn't quite make sense when we consider the praise that is heaped on the dishonest manager. So with what are we left? What are we, as children of the light, able to learn from the children of this age? In other words, what can believers in Christ learn from those who are non-believers? One word that comes to mind is "initiative."

When I was in second grade, a new kid moved in just down the street. He was a year younger than me, but still we stayed friends all through high school. Then I got a girl-friend with whom I spent most of my time. We both went off to college and lost track of each other – for a long time.

I hadn't spoken to him in about eighteen years when he called me one day. We were living over in Morocco and I was really surprised to hear this voice out of the past. After spending some time catching up on our families and careers, he said he wanted to talk to me about a business opportunity. He wanted to get me involved in Amway.

Now I don't know if any of you are involved with Amway or not – and there is nothing wrong with that. What surprised me were his passion and his initiative. He had to track me down after not seeing me for almost two decades. And then he had to make a very detailed and elaborate sales pitch. I told him Amway wasn't for me, but I had to admire his persistence and his initiative. I just wish that Christians would be that persistent and that passionate about the gospel.

The shrewd manager in the parable certainly took the initiative when it came down to saving his career. I would hope that we can learn a lesson from him.

A couple of other words come to mind – drastic action. Notice the drastic action that was taken by the shrewd manager. He was in a spot and needed to find a soft place to land, so he did all that he could to obtain a positive outcome. I wish Christians would realize that drastic action is needed on our part because we are talking about nothing less than the eternal kingdom of God. Let's not forget that sin has the power to kill us as well as our friends and neighbors. Faced with that reality, isn't drastic action required?

Here is the situation for us. We are not talking simply about our employment like the man in the parable. We are talking about the Kingdom of God. We are talking about God who loved us enough to sacrifice his own Son for our sins and the sins of the entire world. Don't you think that this is something about which we can get worked up?

If unbelievers can get revved up about their jobs or about their employers or about accounts receivable, don't you think that Christians can get revved up about the gospel? What can we do? How can we get involved? What drastic action can we take? If unbelievers are willing to give all of themselves for their own self-protection, can we be willing to give all of ourselves for the gospel?

I think that giving one's all for the gospel will mean different things for different people, because we all have different gifts, abilities, and interests. But the issue is finding our own particular niche and working with all our might with the talents God gave us, in order that Christ's name may be made known. It calls for drastic action. Are we ready?