

## Jesus' Sense of Humor

September 22, 2013

Luke 16: 1-13

The parable in our gospel lesson this morning is difficult for us to understand, because it is not a positive parable, but a negative one.

To help us to understand this parable, I would like to share a modern parable, and then a story about a politician who was concerned about getting reelected.

The Parable of the Labor Racketeer. There was a certain labor racketeer who had grown rich on sweetheart contracts and in the use of pension fund money. One day he found that the F.B.I. was tailing him and he began to suspect that there was no escape for him.

So what did he do? Carefully he put a large sum of money in a Swiss bank so that no one could touch it and faced trial. After exhausting all appeals, he was sentenced and served time in the Atlanta Federal Prison. Having served his time, He took his money and moved to Miami Beach where he lived happily ever after .

The second story is about Senator Huey Long who was trying to get reelected to the Senate. He was campaigning in southern Louisiana where he was taken aside by a local politician and reminded that he would be speaking to a lot of Catholic voters.

Throughout the day Long told his audiences how as a boy he would get up at six o'clock on Sunday mornings, hitch the family horse to the buggy and take his Catholic grandparents to mass. After he brought them home, he would turn around and take his Baptist grandparents to church.

At the end of the day, the, local politician complimented Long and expressed his surprise at learning he had Catholic grandparents, To which Huey Long replied: "Don't be a fool. We didn't even have a horse."

Aren't these stories edifying? Would you like to be one of these people? They are rascals, rogues, crooks, liars, and all around pretty unquestionable people. These stories are not good examples of how we are to live our lives.

But this is just the kind of story Jesus told, about a crook, a dishonest steward who was commended for his dishonesty. He had cheated his boss and was being fired. But before he lost his job, he thought about how he would take care of himself.

He was used to a good living and couldn't bear to dig ditches or beg, So he decided that the people who owed his boss money would be grateful to him, if their bill could be changed.

He invited these debtors in, and asks them to change their bill. His boss finds out about it and instead of becoming angry, he commends this guy for using his head, for thinking fast on his feet, so that he would be taken care of.

Jesus was using humor, dry humor, to make a point. There is a bit of irony in this story.

We aren't to be like the dishonest steward in his dishonest deeds, but this is the point - we are to be like him in that he thought how he could get himself out of such a desperate situation.

Jesus is letting his disciples know with a great force, with a dry sense of humor, that the people of the world are outsmarting the people of light. This conniving rogue faced the facts, sized up a situation and acted in quick, cold logic.

Jesus wished that his followers would do as much from nobler motives.

Jesus is saying in a humorous way, if only the Christian was as eager and ingenious in his attempt to attain goodness as the people of the world are in their attempts to attain money and comfort.

Jesus wants us to act with the same intensity in our discipleship toward him as the rascals, cheats, and crooks act in their attempt to gain comfort and wealth.

If crooks and those who are only looking out for their own welfare are so ingenious and can act so decisively about things that really don't matter, why do Christians seem so casual about the care of their souls?

Do we as Christians work as hard at our discipleship in following Jesus, as the two business men in the following story do at trying to cheat people?

Two partners had a clothing store. One would stay in the back room while the other waited on the people. The one waiting on the people would pretend he was hard of hearing. When a customer would choose a suit he liked, he would ask the price.

The clerk would call to his partner in the back room, "How much is this suit, Harry?" Harry would reply loud and clear so the customer would be sure to hear, "\$149.00" The clerk would then say, "He said it is \$129.00."

Many people would hurry and buy the suit for \$129.00, thinking they were making a good deal because the person waiting on them did not hear the right price. Little did the customer realize that his greed cost him several dollars. The same suit sold for \$119.00 or less in other places.

These two men went to great lengths to assure themselves of a comfortable living at the cost of cheating the public.

But do we as children of the light, as Jesus describes those who follow him, act with the same intensity, the same effort in living for Jesus?

Do we practice our prayer life with the same intensity as a professional athlete practices to improve his skills?

I read in Reader's Digest about a golfer who wanted to make the professional golfers tour. The article said the man practiced so long and so hard that his hands would frequently bleed at the end of the practice session.

How many of us have bleeding hands because we have folded them in prayer for so long and with such intensity?

Do we have the same drive to communicate with God as that golfer had in trying to put a little ball in a little cup so that he could make big money??

Do you see the point Jesus is making in this parable? He is saying that since the people of the world are so intense in their way of life, why aren't my followers??

If the crooks of the world will stop at nothing to make money, if the professional athlete will practice long and hard to become good, why aren't we who are followers of Jesus as committed to him with such zeal, ambition, and dedication?

Jesus says, "for the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the people of light".

Jesus is saying, why aren't you as committed to me with such shrewdness as the people of this world are in looking out for themselves?

This parable is not dealing with commending a person for being dishonest, but it really deals with one's commitment or discipleship toward Jesus.

Jesus wants our lifestyle committed to him. He wants the way we act, the way we think, the way we make decisions, the way we interact with others, and yes, our financial commitment, all to be influenced by our commitment to him.

Jesus doesn't want us for only one hour a week on Sunday morning, but he wants every hour every day, He wants an intensity in that relationship that comes before anything else on this earth.

And he wants us to work at that commitment. Not take it for granted, or leave it all up to him, but he wants our active participation in this relationship.

In this relationship we have with Jesus, we come to experience his love for us, then we take that love and give it to others. We become a tool, we became the incarnate presence of Jesus' love in a world that is crying out for someone to care.

Jesus wants our incarnate presence in the world to be intense, fully committed to bringing his love into all that brokenness.

I've given you several negative examples this morning. Here's one about the kind of person Jesus is talking about.

This man was a retired farmer who was devoutly religious. Each day of his life, he would offer in prayer the names of his offspring, extending to those who were even in the 5th generation.

Every day he would pray for these children, and many generations of great grandchildren.

He would offer in prayer the needs, the joys, the heartache, the events of celebration that came into their lives and also into his life.

He felt that if he prayed for them, if he communicated to God how important all their souls and lives were to him, God would indeed be faithful and play an active part in their lives.

But as these generations grew, some would feel awkward and ashamed at his open faith and his reminder that daily he was praying for them, because many of them did not have a relationship to the God that was so important in this man's life.

When the old gentleman died, one family member who was of the third generation finally realized what had been happening in his life.

Since the day this third generation family member was born, the older man had been saying his name in prayer daily.

In his mind's eye, the younger man could now picture his grandfather with his arms and hands uplifted in prayer; heavy with the weight of the entire family; heavy with the weight of his life that needed that kind of prayer that he had not said on his own.

He approached the casket he reached out and touched his grandfather's hands, a belated, but heartfelt act of gratitude and thanksgiving for all the prayers that had been offered.

But sadly, many people of faith have little intensity, little effort, to portray the love of Christ in their lives or in the lives of others.

This parable is really not about money, but about commitment, giving of one's self to Jesus. But too many of us are like the people in the following:

"A young pastor was called to a small town in Iowa. He had tried for several months to move the people to a more dedicated Christian life. He worked diligently on his sermons, tried to teach and lead. but to no avail.

He felt his flock, his church was dead. So the pastor placed a notice in the local paper stating that since the church was dead, it was his duty to give it a decent Christian burial. The funeral would be held the following Sunday morning.

Morbidly curious, the whole town turned out for the funeral. In front of the church the people could see a large casket covered with flowers. The young pastor read a eulogy, and delivered a sermon on how the church had suffered a slow and painful death.

Then he invited the congregation to step forward and pay their last respects to the departed. As they filed by, each one peeked into the casket and quickly turned away with a guilty sheepish look. For in the casket, tilted at the correct angle, was a large mirror. Everyone saw his/her own reflection as perhaps never before!!

The following Sunday, the congregation was in their pews and waiting for the pastor as they realized what indeed the church, the body of Christ was all about. It is about souls, and discipleship, commitment and surrendering one's whole life over to Christ."

A commitment to Jesus and to the body of Christ, the church, is what Jesus is getting at in this parable.

Jesus closes this parable with a statement which strikes to the heart of the matter as he says: "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

John Ruskin a famous preacher of years ago, said this as he watched a lamplighter lighting the gas street light . "Now that is what I mean by a Christian. You ought to be able to see where he has been by the lights that he leaves burning behind him."

Next Sunday is stewardship Sunday – pledge Sunday. We are going to offer our pledges to God and this church for financial support. I could spend this hour, and many more, talking about giving money.

But remember I promised John Miller, and you, that there would be only one stewardship sermon this year, and that will be next week.

But I do want to ask you to be thinking seriously this week about your commitment. Each of you has to decide how you are going to respond.

Someone has said that "Stewardship is what a person does after he says, I believe."

Pearl Bartle put it this way: "I fail or succeed in my stewardship of life in proportion to how convinced I am that life belongs to God."

Everything IS the Lord's. I pray that our giving will truly reflect that belief.