

Peter Wiley
 Luke 16:1-13
 Hudson
 9-23-07

INTRODUCTION: Our Gospel lesson this morning is arguably the most perplexing of all of Jesus' parables. It doesn't seem to make sense. In the passage we have a story that praises – of all things – dishonesty.

SCRIPTURE: *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. 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.' 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. I have decided what to do so that when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly and make it fifty.' 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.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light. 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. 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. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve to 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.*

SERMON:

I have few questions I want to ask as we start this morning.

1. Raise your hand if you think it is wrong to lie.
2. Raise your hand if you think it is wrong to steal, blatantly mislead or falsify the truth.

I think we can all pretty much agree that those are bad things to do.

3. Now raise your hand if *you* have ever lied, stolen or misled.
4. And finally . . . do you think you were ever justified in lying?
5. What if your friend was being chased by a madman with a gun and showed up at your door . . . and you hid your friend in your basement. What if that man with a gun showed up and asked if your friend was in your house. Would it be alright to lie then?

I think that's a lie God not only would forgive but encourage.

Consider a piece one of you shared with me recently. A father passing by his son's bedroom was astonished to see his bed nicely made and everything picked up. Then he saw an envelope, propped up prominently on the pillow, addressed: "Dad." With the worst premonition he opened the envelope with trembling hands and read the letter.

Dear Dad: It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I had to elope with my new girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with mom and you. I have fallen in love with Stacey. She is so nice. But . . . I knew you wouldn't approve of her because of all her piercings, tattoos, motorcycle clothes and the fact that she is so much older than I am. And there's more, Dad, she's pregnant. Stacey said that we will be very happy. She owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter. We have a dream of having many more children. Stacey has opened my eyes to the fact that marijuana doesn't really hurt anyone. We'll be growing it for ourselves and trading it with neighbors. Don't worry Dad. I'm 15 and I know how to take care of myself. Someday I'm sure that we will be back to visit so that you can get to know your grandchildren.

Love, your son John.

P.S. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm over at Tommy's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than the report card in my center desk drawer. I love you. Call me when it's safe to come home.

Can you imagine Jesus praising the actions of the boy who wrote the letter? It's a pretty devious way to try to avoid the wrath of his parents, *for his failure in school*. But if we take our gospel this morning seriously, something tells me Jesus very well may have given him a pat on the back for his creative effort.

Was the momentary misleading of his father a lie? Or was it a helpful lesson in gaining better perspective on the bigger picture?

I remember back when I was in junior high. One morning as I was getting ready to head to school, my mother was helping me gather my scattered papers and saw I had a huge science test that morning. She asked if I'd studied for it. But she already knew the answer even before my eyes betrayed that I'd obviously forgotten the test. So she told me – as only a mother can – that I would pay the price. There was even a sick glimmer of pleasure in the way she said it.

It was one of those tests that are supposed to demand a full week's preparation. I crammed for exactly four and a half minutes outside the classroom door. When I got the test back a week later, I proudly showed my mother the teacher's comments at the top reading: *Peter, this shows real preparation . . . good work . . . A-*. Now I thought my mother would be happy – say, "aren't you my cunning son to have pulled that one out" . . . I was wrong.

But what about the parable in the gospel this morning? Think about it: Jesus tells of a manager who's been charged with either horrible mismanagement or embezzlement. His boss tells him he's fired and he's got to hand over the books so that he can close all his accounts. Now . . . says the parable, the manager's got to think quickly. Losing this job will put him on the streets. He can't imagine living through the shame of going on welfare . . . and just the thought of manual labor makes his back ache. So what's he do? He cooks the books. He goes out and makes deals with his master's debtors, cutting a bill for 100 to fifty and another down to eighty. Does he do it to hurt his boss? No. He does it hoping his conniving actions might cut him some favors in the future with those he helped. Now *they'll owe him*.

And this is where the really weird part comes in. This is where we would expect the parable to condemn the dishonest manager. But it doesn't. It does the opposite. This cheating manager's boss praises him for his creativity. His boss tells him that it's about time he got out of the box and did some wheeling and dealing. The passage doesn't tell us what happens next . . . but it sure sounds like the guy won back his job.

Can you imagine how mad a story like this got Jesus' listeners! It shook up their well ordered ideas of what it meant to be people of faith. How can the gospel . . . the good news encourage behavior like that?

Why do you think Jesus would tell his disciples story like that? I wonder if his disciples were starting to be so influenced by the scribes and Pharisees who kept trying to put everyone and every situation into a neat little box – black & white, good & bad – who were so quick to judge other people's actions without trying to understand and know the person . . . and failing to look more closely at themselves.

Could this weird little parable about a fraudulent manager be Jesus attempt to shake up their small minded thinking and take each person seriously instead? Instead of jumping to quick judgment . . . try to understand *first*.

Have you ever noticed that in the gospels Jesus almost never saw a problem or a fault . . . he addressed a need. He didn't judge people . . . he offered a loving hand. This parable has maddened commentators since the day it was first written down. How do you make sense of praising the dishonest? Maybe Jesus is saying that *sometimes* the ends *do* justify the means. Not most of the time . . . but maybe sometimes questionable means are exactly what's needed to get to the right ends. It's maddening, because it confuses everything. It shakes it all up. It says that sometimes black is really white and white is really black. That sometimes being honest may *not* be the faithful answer.

What does it all say to us today?

It says: Put yourself in the other person's situation before judging.

It says: Seek to know the perspective of another people or country's actions before condemning.

It says: Be about God's way, work and love, instead of quickly assuming right answers.

That's a pretty demanding idea. And yet it is the way that Jesus repeatedly calls us to throughout the gospels. And . . . it's the way that leads to faithfulness . . . and ultimately to life itself.