

September 19, 2010

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

Sermon: "Who can you trust?"

It is never a good sign for the minister when we start out our sermon preparation and all the commentators can agree on is that the text is a difficult text and that no one knows exactly what the text is supposed to mean. As one of the commentators said, "With this text, a preacher could get three different sermons and they could either be all wrong or all right."

To be honest, I had thought about forgetting this text and seeing if there wasn't just a little easier Gospel word to decipher until I read a sermon given by Dr. Thomas Long that opened my eyes and made me realize that Luke added this story for a reason and this story is a challenging word that we as the Church need to hear especially now as we struggle to find our role, our place in this world that is changing and tells us that we are not relevant anymore.

So I invite us to take a look at this seemingly confusing uncomfortable parable. In our Scripture today, we get a story of a guy who has been called to the carpet for cheating, for cooking the books, for squandering his master's resources. And basically he is told, "You're fired. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. You are out the door. And after the shock wears off, the man starts to think about his future and what he is going to do now that he basically has nothing. He realizes that he isn't strong enough for manual labor. He also realizes that he is too proud to beg. So he thinks outside of the box and does something outrageous. He calls on all his boss's clients and says, "Look, we are feeling generous. How about we settle these accounts for less than what you owe?" Good news for the people who owe the money.

And when the boss finds out that he did this, he is actually not fired but the boss congratulates him on being a shrewd businessman! Crazy story and not the outcome that we were expecting. And then just when we are still reeling from the story, Jesus says something peculiar. He says that he wishes that the children of the light, the believers, his followers, were as shrewd in their dealings as the children of the world are in theirs because they get it!

Now at this point, we as part of the children of the light start to wonder about Jesus. "Surely he is not commending this dishonest manager. He's lied. He's cheated. He cooked the books. Jesus, don't you remember somewhere is says something about not lying. It is pretty important. And Jesus turns to us and says: Remember this is a parable and the purpose of parables is to get all of us thinking about the Kingdom of God in a new way. What Jesus is really commending is that this dishonest manager wheeled and dealt to secure his future. He risked it all to secure his future. He took chances to secure his future.

And in Kingdom language-that is what Jesus commends and encourages us as children of the light to do as well: to risk it all for the Kingdom of God.

By telling this story, Jesus is using what the people know. Jesus knew, just like the author of Luke knew, just like we know now that there are people out there [getting] up every morning scheming for a buck, focusing every ounce of energy on feathering their nest, working in overdrive to secure themselves and to scramble to the top of the heap."

And by telling this parable, Jesus is saying, “If only God’s people would be just as focused and energetic for the [Good News]. Jesus says Business people get it. Their eyes are on the prize and they wheel and deal to get it. Just imagine what the Body of Christ here on earth would look like, would be if we as communities of faith had that same drive and devotion. As one commentator said, “roughly translated, Jesus is saying...Look, Jack Welch got up every morning of his career focusing all of his energy, imagination, intelligence, and passion for the bottom line at General Electric; [That’s what business people do.] How dare the people of God do any less for the things of God?”

[Through this parable, Jesus is asking us to define our ministries, our faith by desire and passionate devotion and ask ourselves] Will we, as [people of faith], get up every morning focusing all of [our] energy, imagination, intelligence, and passion on the ways of peace, the paths of justice, the building up of the Body of Christ, and the hope of the gospel, [to secure the Kingdom of God here on earth for all of God’s children, to secure our future as communities of faith?”

Jesus is commending the shrewdness of this manager. He is commending the passion of this manager. He is commending the “willingness to think outside of the box” to secure the future of this manager. He is commending the manager’s willingness to risk it all to achieve that outcome that would secure his future.

And that is the challenging word for us today. Jesus wants us to take a hard look at ourselves and our churches. Are we willing to risk it all to achieve the Body of Christ here on earth? Jesus wants us to keep our eye on the prize but the prize isn’t wealth, power, money, or riches. The prize is the peaceable kingdom, where all are welcomed, where all are accepted, where all are loved, where all live in peace.

What Jesus is commending on behalf of the dishonest manager is his willingness to use his resources, his money, his talents, his wisdom, and his connections, to obtain his future. And Jesus asks us why aren’t we doing the same? Why aren’t we using all of our resources, our time, our talent, our money, and our gifts of service, to achieve the prize: the Kingdom of God here on earth?

The challenging word comes to us just as it came to the dishonest manager: Jesus is calling us to the carpet. No we haven’t cooked the books in our favor but Jesus is calling us to the carpet because we have squandered the resources that God has given us, because we have not been shrewd in using God’s resources here on here to build up the Body of Christ. We have held onto our resources, saving them for a rainy day. We have said that we earned them ourselves and that we don’t have to share. We have said that there is not enough to go around, so we take ours and leave others the scraps. We act like we worship the God of scarcity, not the God of abundance.

And Jesus says that it doesn’t work that way. That God doesn’t work that way. That the Kingdom of God doesn’t work that way.

By telling this parable, Jesus is challenging us to think outside the box and not simply go about business as usual. Jesus is telling us that we “can no longer preach greed and call it the gospel. We can no longer run a private club and call it the church.”

By telling this parable, Jesus is challenging us to think about what we are investing in as the Body of Christ on earth. Are we investing in our survival or are we investing in God’s Kingdom? Are we in it for ourselves or are we going to practice what we preach: welcoming the stranger, taking care of the poor, speaking out for the voiceless, being agents of God’s justice here on earth.

When faced with these hard questions and these hard realities, we as the church are beginning to look around, just like the dishonest manger, and realize that we basically have nothing. This world is telling us that we are irrelevant, that we are outdated, and that we don’t belong. And we are getting shoved to the sidelines.

And Jesus says, Children of the Light, it is time for some wheeling and dealing. Jesus says it is time to use our resources and go out into this world and say to all those who are broken, who are hurting, who are lost, who are on the fringes, say to all those who have been told that they don’t belong: “Hey, Have we got a deal for you? It is an invitation to the table, not our table but God’s table. And it is an invitation of grace, an invitation of hope. Have we got a deal for you? We have a word that will make us whole once more. We have got a word that will make things new again. We have got a word that will make things renewed once more. And it won’t cost a thing. It has already been paid for by Jesus Christ. It is already given to us, free of charge because here is the crazy thing: God loves us. It is already ours. No strings attached. What a great deal!

Midway Christian Church-where are we investing our resources? In our survival? Or as stewards of God’s resources working feverously for the Kingdom of God?

Midway Christian Church-it is time for some wheeling and dealing! And I don’t mean rummage sale.

Midway Christian Church- have I got a deal for you?

Are you interested?

May we always use and invest our resources in the principles of the Kingdom of God. Amen.