

Cooking the Books for Your Buddies [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 16:1—13

Back when I worked as Night Manager at *Arby's*, I had no idea. Back when the Day Manager and the Owner of the franchise trained me in adding up the sales numbers and doing the inventory of roast beef, french fries and onion rolls, I had no idea what the future might bring. I performed my duties, however, with attention to detail, and with being scrupulous about all the dollar bills and the coins changing hands. It was the mid-1980's when credit cards hadn't yet achieved the functionality and the practicality of today. And so, as the fast food industry went about its business then, there were occasionally those times when the cash registers didn't seem to tally things up correctly, and when that happened the reason was usually a matter of miscounting pennies, nickels and dimes. Nothing nefarious happened; no one embezzled funds; no one cooked the books. And yet, I do remember a moment when someone interrupted all that honest work. It was just before closing, when a homeless man entered the lobby and stood on the freshly mopped floor. "I'm sorry," he said. "I have no money, but may I have a sandwich?"

Now, I mention that episode because there's something about the parable of Jesus that runs parallel with it—and that is, there's right and there's wrong and there's also relationship. In other words, I would hazard to guess that everyone in this room believes that Jesus Christ is the quintessential model of morality—and that he'd want us to conduct ourselves without a hint of impropriety—and that he'd insist on the highest standard of ethics—and that he'd consider even the most minor breach of that standard something for which we'd need to seek forgiveness. But, you see, what we read in Luke 16 ought to give us reason to pause.

Is the end-goal faith in God simply to ground us in a moral code? Take another look at the text:

1. It's about a manager who has been accused of squandering a rich man's property; and is about to be fired; there's an uncomfortable transition about to take place; and
2. From the point of the view of the manager, who has been in charge of collecting the rich man's debts, we learn that he's cooking the books; he's inviting one debtor to pay less for a hundred jugs of olive oil; he's invited another debtor to alter his receipts so that instead of paying for 100 containers of wheat, he'll pay for 80; and
3. Pay attention to this startling reversal: ***"And his master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly"***; that is, rather than the master becoming angry about these shenanigans, he affirms him.

Now, I don't mind telling you that I'm a little confused; and I would caution all of us to not try to clear things up with an easy platitude. For instance, *'A penny saved is a penny earned'* is not in the Bible; nor is the phrase, *'God helps those who help themselves.'* So, let's not do that. For once, let's operate under the assumption that Jesus actually *wants* us to wrestle with what he has to say. And what he has to say might dovetail with the brutal declarations of Jeremiah: ***"the summer is ended and we are not saved... For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt. I mourn, and dismay has overtaken me."*** Please notice—how the prophet doesn't even try to resolve his confusion, how he doesn't look for an immediate silver lining. And we might apply the same kind of honesty in trying to approach the Crucified Teacher who teaches us this morning.

Consider this: the Roman Empire, under whose authority Jesus was put to death, imposes a set of economic conditions where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer—and where the bulk of taxes collected in Judea are sent to Rome. Peasants are in debt. The vast majority of the population lives and dies owing money to people who don't need it. And now, here's comes Jesus, who eats and drinks with those same capitulating tax collectors, and what's he telling them? How does he suggest that they handle the drachmas that's passing through their hands?

A few years after I handed that homeless man an *Arby's* roast beef sandwich, the main character in the 1987 film, *Wall Street*, made an infamous speech. And you have to picture Gordon Gecko, dressed in his impeccable pin-strip, double-breasted suit, with his shiny shoes and his slicked-back hair, and before a board of directors he says, “*The point, ladies and gentleman, is that greed—for lack of a better word—is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms—greed for life, greed for money, greed for love, greed for knowledge—has marked the upward surge of mankind...*” And, you see, there’s something about these sentences that’s brutally honest. *Finally somebody!*—even if it’s a fictional character—says it out loud. In fact, these many decades later, there are non-fictional politicians saying the same thing. And if you were to ask me what any of this has to do with faith in God, I’d have to tell you that Jesus performed the miracles of feeding the five-thousand in the grinding teeth of their ‘Greed is Good’ bosses.

Jia Tolentino was the child of immigrants from the Philippines who settled outside of Houston, Texas and joined a megachurch. “The church I grew up,” she writes in her book,

“was so big we called it the *Repentagon*. Its campus was spread across forty-two acres in a leafy, rich, white neighborhood... There was a restaurant, a bookstore, four basketball courts, a full exercise center, and a cavernous mirrored atrium. You could spend your whole life inside the Repentagon—starting at the nursery school, continuing through the twelfth grade, getting married on the campus, structuring your adult life around this town-size church... The Worship Center sat sixty-five hundred people. Twenty thousand pass through it each weekend. Around it, a mall-size parking lot circled the campus: on Sunday’s, the church looked like a car dealership, and during the week, like a fortress, surrounded by an impersonal asphalt moat [*Trick Mirror*: 130-1]

But here’s the thing—what Tolentino discovers over time is that none of this opulent hoopla helps. And the way she manages to survive is by being dishonest. In other words, she has doubts; and with a wink and a nod she finds ‘friends’ with whom she can express those doubts.

“And I tell you,” Jesus says in verse nine,

“make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

So, let’s backtrack. Let’s re-trace our steps. Could it be that Jesus acknowledges how the whole kit and caboodle of human civilization gets by on greed—and not just greed for money and power, but greed for absolute certainty? And could it be that he anticipates how helpless we’re going to feel as the very church that gathers in his name *caves* to that same system? And, if the answer is *YES*, the only way we’re going to get by is by *NOT* taking ourselves—or our institutions—so seriously. Make friends for yourselves... in the middle of it all. Find and cultivate relationships among those who have been burdened and overburdened with debts—and with all kinds of debt—financial, emotional, psychological and spiritual debts...

In the classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this prepubescent, wisenheimer of a kid from Missouri finds himself floating upriver on a raft with a runaway slave. Maybe you remember the story. And the part that always stirs me up is the moment when Huck has to decide between honoring his friendship with ol’ Jim... or turning him into proper authorities for reward money. And he believes that if he doesn’t turn him in, he’ll go to hell. Miss Watson, his Sunday School teacher, had always told Huck that God wants certain people to be slaves and that the right thing to do is treat Jim like stolen property. And here’s this paper that’s been posted on a tree, promising the white boy \$200 if he only does the right thing:

“It was a close place.... I was trembling because I got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself, ‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell’—and tore it up.”

You see, what I think Mark Twain is getting at is the same dynamic that Jesus alludes to in his parable. He doesn't encourage us to do immoral, dishonest things *as a rule*; but what if the whole system itself is immoral? What if those in political power over us only pretend to be honest and to act in our best interest? How do we maneuver? How do we get through it?

Percival Everett is a black writer, who more recently took up the task of re-telling this adventure from the point of view of the slave. The 2024 novel is entitled, *James*, and what's different about it is that, it turns out, ol' Jim has been dishonest with almost everyone; he's dishonest because he knows how to read, but he feigns ignorance. It turns out, in fact, that James has even read philosophers like John Locke, who argue about human freedom. And there's this one scene, when James has been dreaming about an argument with John Locke; and as he's talking in his sleep, Huck hears him use words he's never heard from a slave's lips before:

"What's *hierarchy* mean?" says Huck as James opens his eyes.

"What?" (good ol' Jim replies) "Ain't no such word."

"You said it. And a lotta other words. You didn't sound like you. Are you possessed, Jim?"

"Lawdy, I could be, I s'pose."

This is really important dialogue, and what I'm suggesting this morning is that there's a 'wealth' of this misdirection happening all the time; and maybe Jesus would like us to learn from it. Luke 16, verses 10—12 says this:

"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?"

I've been thinking a lot about church property—even the property here. And I've wondered about what average person, driving by, thinks; *do they think we own it?* (Does the Presbyterian Church own it?). And if that's what the outsider thinks about the steeples, about the choir lofts, about the pews, about the fellowship halls and the pulpits—isn't Jesus telling us this morning to introduce a little confusion into that way of thinking?

Somewhere I read about a congregation that once hosted over a thousand people in worship, but that had dwindled to a remnant of 15 aging adults. And they had a choice. A conglomerate of real estate developers had approached them, offering millions of dollars so that they might bulldoze everything and replace the church with a series of high-rise condominiums. Only the rich and well-connected would be able to live there; and those who depended on the church for its food pantry, its meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, would have to go elsewhere. Even so, the developers were only offering the *honest* market price. And yet, in the middle of this huge meeting, with accountants, lawyers and budget-sheets, one of the church folks stepped outside and noticed a frail woman, trying to pump up a flat-tire on her broken-down bicycle. They looked at one another, and pretty soon, another church member came outside and joined in this conversation about how to fix this bike. And at some point the woman said, 'IT'S LIKE YOUR A BICYCLE REPAIR SHOP AND A CHURCH...' And I wonder if you'll believe me when I tell you how they *managed*—how they cooked the books so that a building with a pipe-organ became a non-profit Bicycle Cooperative— and how the church folks rented space there—and how they talked and listened to people who ordinarily wouldn't set foot inside a religious institution—and how some of them heard the mysterious music of grace?