

September 18, 2016  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 16:1-13

### Tricksters

The gospel parable that we just heard is one of the trickiest parables Jesus tells—tricky because of its economics, and relationships, and timing, and most especially its characters.

There's this really rich guy, he has lots and lots of property, his assets are HUGE. But then he hears that his middleman, or manager, is losing him money, so the rich guy calls the manager into his office and says, "You're fired!"

The manager hears this news and he starts scratching his chin. The manager says to himself, "Hmm... that's not good for me. What I need now are friends, and I just might have a way to make some friends, really fast..." So then the manager hurries out to find the rich guy's debtors—you get a sense that there are a lot of people who have financial issues with this rich guy. But before the debtors hear that the manager is no longer the manager, he says, "What was it you owed? Here, make it much, much less than that..." And does the same for other debtors.

Then the rich guy hears about this. Now you might expect this really rich guy to get really mad, go off script, call into question the manager's manhood or insult his patriotism. But he doesn't. This rich guy is someone else altogether. This rich guy is someone who surprises us with his approval, his willingness to reassess, even work with, someone who has wronged him.

And then the parable gets even more surprising, and even trickier, because Jesus praises the manager, too. Jesus praises a guy who loses his job through apparent incompetence and then goes behind his bosses' back to give money that is not his to other people so that they will pay him back with hospitality in the future. And after praising this trickster, Jesus says this, to anybody listening: "Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth..."

Doesn't that statement—from Jesus—sound surprising, strange? And doesn't it also sound strangely pertinent to this political season? Let me be clear that I am talking about both major political parties and their candidates, both of whom have done some tricky maneuverings and have massive amounts of wealth. There is one that does seem unambiguous about this parable: since the time of Jesus, 2,000 years ago, and right up to this election year, politicians have heard and heeded Jesus' statement: "Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth..."

Now it could be, as some biblical interpreters say, it could be that Jesus is being sarcastic. That, in itself, is a tricky suggestion: that the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, could be sarcastic. It could be that Jesus, true God from true God, could drop a wry, dry comment now and then. He was also truly human, after all. Jesus could have a wicked sense of humor, if he wanted.

It could be that Jesus was being sarcastic. He most certainly was being prophetic. Jesus knew all about the behavior of politicians, and businessmen, and women—of us, of all of the ways that we make friends by means of dishonest wealth, all of the ways we squander the riches entrusted to us, all of the ways we should be fired, and all of the ways that we are in debt: be it local or global, social or environmental: our city and state finances, the way we allocate money as a nation, as one of the world's wealthiest nations, and all the ways we don't, the effect of our fiscal policies on the poor, the elderly, the mentally ill. Our misuse of creation: the man-made effects of global warming, an ecological crisis that we don't need to wait another 2,000 years to

see, but that is happening even now, affecting our glaciers and our coastlines—God’s glaciers and coastlines. We were supposed to care for, steward, manage, God’s resources, instead we squander them, and then try to cut deals as we look ahead to future destitution.

And Jesus praises the manager, this trickster, the parable’s seeming protagonist?! It’s a tricky parable—and not the only one Jesus tells. This parable occurs in the context of several other parables, it is part of a sequence of parables. If you were here last week, you heard the first two. I think we did a good job of emphasizing a main character in the first of those parables—if you can call an animal a character. Flocks of that animal are still to be found on signs in the fellowship hall—that one that was lost, that the good shepherd went out and found: the parable of the lost sheep. Just after that is the parable of the lost coin. Just after that there’s another parable of something lost—we didn’t hear it last Sunday but it’s one of the most famous parables in Luke, a parable of a father who has a child who spends his whole inheritance on dissolute living, finally finds himself alone in a pig pen. So it is that the gospel sequences these parables in this way: the parable of the lost sheep, then the lost coin, and then the lost son—the Prodigal Son. And then this one, today, this one...

But just like the lost sheep and the lost coin lead to one about a lost son, so that one leads to today’s parable, there are striking similarities between the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Parable of the Trickster Manager. Both parables begin in the same way... “There was a man who...” and he’s a man of means, someone with property, an inheritance to give. Just like the prodigal son, the manager squanders the riches. As a result, both are or are about to become, destitute. Just like the prodigal son, scratching his chin amid the swine, so also the manager thinks to himself, asks himself, “How can I get out of this?” Both come up with a plan. Both seek welcome into houses. And, finally, most significantly, though both the manager and the prodigal son take steps, the sudden turn in the story is the father’s, or the master’s: the astonishing welcome, the surprising commendation.

Jesus also commends the manager, strangely enough.

Now perhaps this tricky parable is, as yet some other interpreters say, about the broken fiscal world of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, a world in which the super wealthy used middlemen to squeeze ever more out of the poor. Perhaps we know about that world, today. Perhaps this middleman, this manager, made a bold move; perhaps he decreased what the debtors owed, a debt that was predicated on an unjust system in an unfair world. Perhaps this middleman took an audacious, criminal act and upended that world. Some say that’s just what God does in Jesus—our mediator. That’s what God does in the cross: an audacious, criminal act that upends the world.

And now, Jesus says, “What will you do?” We’re in the middle of it, now, Midwesterners in the middle of an election year, watching as the middle class shrinks, as the rich grow richer and the poor poorer. What will we do? We could scratch our chins. We will scratch our heads over this parable, until eternity, until we are welcomed into eternal homes.

We are welcomed, parables remind us, we are welcomed, only by the astonishing grace of God, God who has some tricks up his sleeve. What will we do? Even as we are caught in the middle, we can be faithful, Jesus says, be faithful in little things. Act faithfully, on behalf of the least, we can be faithful in very little things, and so in big things. We can be faithful in what belongs to another, for it all belongs to God, who wants to give it all, who wants to give true riches, to you.