

Gospel Reading: Luke 16:1-13

word count 1,550

Thou shalt commit adultery.

Repeat: Thou *shalt* commit adultery. That's what the Bible says. You can look it up.

According to an old copy of Homiletics Magazine¹ you can find it in the King James Version of 1631, if you can find one, in which the word "not" was accidentally omitted. I'm sure many people were both surprised and delighted to hear of this, but King James' heir, King Charles I, was so upset that he commanded that all copies be destroyed, and he fined every printer who had anything to do with the scandalous edition that decreed, "Thou shalt commit adultery."

Because of the loss of a word, this version became known as "The Wicked Bible."

And it does seem that more and more people today are leaving the "nots" out of their Ten Commandments. Either that, or they are simply ignoring them. Not too many years after King Charles addressed the missing "not," Cromwell would also forget the word, "not," as in "Thou shalt not kill," and King Charles would lose his head. As we know, the commandment not to kill has been out of favor with governments and individuals since Cromwell's day, as is the commandment not to bear false witness against your neighbor. This commandment demands that the truth be told, especially in a court of law, and it forbids anyone to tell a lie in order to gain an advantage over a neighbor.

We live in times that are brutally competitive where the "bottom line" is rewarded. In David Callahan's book, "The Cheating Culture," the author states that cheating is no longer limited to the shady, Damon Runyon-esque culture of petty criminals, hucksters and other low-life characters. Now, he says, everyone is doing it — and because everyone sees everyone else doing it, they keep on doing it. In these Enron and Halliburton inspired days, the bottom-line mentality often allows winners to get away with ethical and criminal transgressions. Honesty might be a nice ideal, but it isn't always true that honest folks come out on top. Callahan argues that cheaters cheat because cheating can help a person to get ahead, especially as the chances of being caught continue to shrink, along with the severity of the punishments that are meted out to offenders who get caught. For many people, the benefits of a successful cheat far outweigh any potential punishment.²

Our own music director, Rob, tells us that as a professor, he puts his students' term papers through a computer program that cross-references them to all available sources, and returns them marked with the areas that have been either borrowed with footnotes or stolen at will. This makes me want to say one more time that I am opening with a footnoted illustration from the September-October 2004 issue of Homiletics Magazine!

Today's story is about a dishonest manager. The point of the story appears to be that we too, can profit by dishonest gains and get away with it. If there was a "Wicked Bible," then this is the "Wicked Parable."

There is this dishonest guy who knows he is about to get canned by the boss. So, he goes around to all of his boss' clients and cuts deals with them with regard to what they owe. He has no authority to do this, and his actions are geared towards ingratiating himself to his boss' debtors in case he needs them later.

When the boss finds out, he congratulates the dishonest employee for his shrewdness. He isn't upset with him at all.

This is where things fall apart. Commentary after commentary has been written on this parable for the edification of the befuddled preacher. Here's one: "The dishonest manager wasn't dishonest after all—he simply deducted his own commission first and returned everything that was owed to his master." That's nice. Here is an interpretation based on believing what we want to believe. But, the text doesn't say anything that supports the "he was really a good guy after all" finding.

Or, "The rich boss discovers that all his debtors like him so much more after his manager took less money from them than was owed. 'Gosh, I never thought that people would like me so much more if they didn't have to pay their bills in full. I'll have to thank that manager I was about to fire who caused me to lose money without my knowledge.'"

This doesn't work for me either. The fact of the story seems to be that after being cheated, the rich boss simply admires the dishonest man's shrewdness that lands him on his feet. And that bothers us. The good guys are supposed to get ahead, while the bad guys get punished.

I think that part of the problem for us is found in the worldview of Luke. For Luke, life is a dress rehearsal and death is opening night. For us moderns, eternity is now, and now, and now again; and we are looking for ways to live ethically in this world in the desire to be people who aspire to love and be loved, to treat others as they themselves would be treated, and as Bishop Spong might say, to recognize God as the ground of all being.

Yet, the parable from Luke is all about the world to come, which is the place of ultimate importance, recognizing that we live in a broken world where everything is passing away. As a colleague told me, "It's a little like living in Atlanta in 1864 and having a pocket full of money with Jefferson Davis' face on it. You better spend it now for the things you need as it won't be worth anything soon, and when you spend it, try to use it to secure your future."

In this respect, the rich boss may be congratulating the dishonest steward for his street-smarts and savvy. After all, as the passage points out, we can't serve two masters, money and God. The steward has learned how to recognize money for what is it and to use it to assure him a place among friends while he is living to the best of his ability in this life. The boss is saying, "streetwise people are always playing the angles and surviving on their wits. I want you to be the same way, but do it for what is right. Maybe the dishonest steward is us, after all. Maybe that is why we learn that the flawed person will get ahead even though he or she may not be deserving of it.

Money changes us. We need it to support our families, our institutions, our schools, and even out pleasures. Stewardship season will be starting in a month, and we will be reminded of how we need to support our church.

But money and possessions are not the problem. It's how they control us and the anxiety they produce. Any of you who have stock portfolios or investments can probably relate to the anxiety factor of the last month. Any of you who bought a house with a teaser rate that turned tormentor know the anxiety around money. I can attest to the fact that those who are in the real estate and mortgage business are on a rollercoaster ride.

In and of themselves, money and possessions have no moral value for good or for ill. But it is how we use them and the importance we place upon them that has ultimate moral value. How do we care for those nearest and dearest, how do we support the institutions and charities that help people in need, how do we use our resources to elect officials that represent our values and vision for our community, our country and the values we wish to see for the creation of a peaceful and peace-loving world? The young people of this church sold candy bars to pay for a peace pole that makes a visible symbol of what they desire for this world, their world, and that

will bring our mayor and neighboring churches and friends to gather around to help us dedicate next week.

The dishonest manager uses money that is not his (remember Luke's worldview—this is just the stuff of this world that is passing through his hands) to make friends for himself in the future. He has done the right thing. Like all of us, these things never fully belong to us. They are just stuff—what is truly important cannot be measured against gold (or these days, perhaps the Canadian dollar). What is truly important is what we do with what we have for the spiritual and greater good.

A sister preacher told me, “When people feel they are being led by the quest for money or possessions, they are always being misled. Those are never the things that are of greatest importance. Find what is important, and there is your treasure, and there is also where to give what treasure you have.”

If you have been faithful with things that don't matter, you most surely can be faithful with things that do. And it's all about practice—every day in every way, we are practicing to be the sorts of people God longs for us to be. Thou shalt commit—to being that kind of person.

Sermon Resources

1. Homiletics Magazine, “The Liar's Club” September-October 2004
2. Ibid.

General--where I speak of “my colleague” I refer to my friend Dr. Shawnthea Monroe-Mueller

Scripture for Sunday, September 23, 2007

Luke 16:1-13

1 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. **2** 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.' **3** 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. **4** I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' **5** So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?' **6** He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' **7** 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.' **8** And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. **9** 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. **10** "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. **11** If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? **12** And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? **13** No slave can serve two 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."

The following Bible stories were apparently written by real students and are genuine, authentic and unretouched. Richard Lederer assembled them; they appeared in *National Review* magazine on 1995-DEC-31.

- In the first book of the Bible, Guinness's, God got tired of creating the world, so He took the Sabbath off. Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree. Noah's wife was called Joan of Ark. Noah built an ark, which the animals came on to in pears. Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night.
- The Jews were a proud people and throughout history they had trouble with the unsympathetic Genitals. Samson was a strongman who let himself be led astray by a Jezebel like Delilah. Samson slayed the Philistines with the axe of the apostles.
- Moses led the Hebrews to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread, which is bread made without any ingredients. The Egyptians were all drowned in the dessert. Afterwards, Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Amendments. The First Commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple. The Fifth Commandment is to humor thy father and mother. The seventh Commandment is thou shalt not admit adultery.
- Moses died before he ever reached Canada. Then Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol. The greatest miracle in the Bible is when Joshua told his son to stand still and he obeyed him.
- David was a Hebrew king skilled at playing the liar. He fought with the Finklesteins, a race of people who lived in Biblical times. Solomon, one of David's sons, had 300 wives and 700 porcupines.
- Jesus enunciated the Golden Rule, which says to do one to others before they do one to you. He also explained, "Man doth not live by sweat alone."
- The people who followed the Lord were called the 12 decibels. The epistles were the wives of the apostles. One of the opossums was St. Matthew who was, by profession, a taximan.
- St. Paul cavorted to Christianity. He preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage. A Christian should have only one wife. This is called monotony.