

Thinking Outside the Box

September 19, 2004

Luke 16: 1-13

This is a very difficult scripture to understand. Please listen carefully, because I'm going to give you a modern version of the parable, ask a question, and then tell you one interpretation of it. Many parables are just given, with no comment. This one is different; it has four interpretations attached. We'll look at each of these in turn. [Read Luke 16:1-13]

Let's try recasting the story in modern terms. Let's suppose that one of Donald Trump's vice presidents (let's call him Vinnie) is really bad--he makes mistakes, he squanders Donald's money. He's inept, inefficient and ineffective. He's so bad that Trump calls him in and says, "Look, I'm going to give you a "heads up." You're going to be fired. Get all your business in order so you can give me an accounting before you have to go." Vinnie thinks to himself, "After I'm fired for absolute incompetence no one is going to hire me. I'm no good a manual labor, I have no skill, and I'm too proud to be a panhandler." Now, as far as we know, he doesn't say to himself. "I wonder if I can steal some money and make it to the Cayman Islands." He doesn't ask himself "I wonder if I can cook the books and walk away with a nest egg." Probably he knows that he'd be caught. But he does get an idea. "If I reduce the debts of all the people I've loaned Trump's money to, they'll be grateful to me and I can live on their favors." Now because he's so incompetent he doesn't even know how much people owe! So he grabs his cell phone, calls a big Texas oil man and asks, "Joe, just how much do you owe Mr. Trump?" "A half million dollars," is the reply." "This is your lucky day, Joe, I'm reducing your debt to a quarter of a million." Then he phones the owner of a chain of restaurants, "Tom, how much did we front you for.?" "A million," he answers. "Make that eight hundred thousand,

Tom.” And he goes through all the accounts, reducing each one. “Now,” he thinks to himself, “When Joe takes his yacht or his houseboat out, he’s so grateful that he’ll be glad to bring me along. And I’ll be able to eat at Tom’s restaurants for free as often as I want. And all the others will welcome me into their homes and condos and hotels. I’ll be riding a gravy train for the rest of my life.”

You have to admit that Vinnie came up with a clever, if dishonest, solution. He really did think outside the box. He didn’t take Trump’s money. Instead he gave it away in such a way that he, and, incidentally, others, would benefit. And what could Trump do? He couldn’t go back to those people and say. “Look guys, Vinnie made a mistake.” First of all, he hadn’t fired him yet, so Vinnie had the authority to do what he did. Secondly, he would look really stingy and two-faced if he tried to go back on the new deal, and he’d probably have lawsuits. Thirdly, he’d probably already received grateful phone calls and praise from the media for being so beneficent. He would at least get good press out of it.

Still, the surprising thing is that he doesn’t reprimand Vinnie for what he’s done. He doesn’t call him on the carpet or rake him over the coals. Instead he says, “I have to hand it to you, that was a really clever move.” Now my question to you is, does he say, “But you’re still fired?”

Let me try an interpretation of the parable. Perhaps God is the rich man, and we are the managers. Then the parable is saying that all we are and have is God’s and we’re here to manage it. And we’re wasting it. And then God comes to us and says “You’ve been wasting everything, wasting your life. Time’s almost up. It’s time for you to give an account of yourself. And we then call in all the people who are indebted to us and reduce their

debt We further forgive those who have wronged us. Wouldn't God commend us and say, "Now that's really clever. Now you're finally catching on?"

Let's look at the interpretations that follow this parable to see if they help us understand. Perhaps you'd like to follow along, using the text on the back of your bulletin, as we look at each section.

First, (v. 8b) "the children of this world are wiser than the children of light" Remember that Jesus also said, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." We Christians should try to be as creative and clever about doing God's work as the vice president was in saving his skin. You may say, "But I'm not clever or creative. I don't know how to think outside the box." Let me remind you, Vinnie wasn't very good either, until he starting thinking about someone he really cared about, namely, himself. Before that he was wasting everything. If we really care about God and God's work, if we're really dedicated to God's will, then the creativity may very well come.

Second, (v. 9) "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous money, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations." In other words, be generous with your money. People who are generous, who assist others, who share, will make friends. Then when you get to the pearly gates there will be people hanging around saying, "Open up, Peter, here comes my friend. He gave money to the church that sponsored the tutoring program for my children." "She contributed to Habitat for Humanity and helped me get my very own home." "He gave money that the church sent to feed us in the orphanage in the Dominican Republic." "She bought me a meal when I was out on the street hungry." "Open up, Peter and let us welcome our friends." Don't hoard your money, use it for good.

Third, (vv. 1-12) “The one who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much ... if you have not been faithful with money, who will entrust you with true riches.” This, at least, is something we understand. We know stories of the man who started out as a bus boy and ended up managing the restaurant. But how does that fit with this parable? Can it be that being faithful with money means using it as God intends, so that we can gain the true riches of grace and a deeper spiritual life?

While I was preparing this sermon, I happened to run across story about Jim Elliott. Jim was one of a group of five missionaries who were attacked and killed in Ecuador as they were trying to establish a mission there. Jim's life was cut short while he was still young. He was a very committed Christian. He once answered friends who feared for his safety by saying: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Fourth, (v. 13) we cannot serve God and wealth. You may remember that this used to be translated “God and Mammon.” When I read that I was both puzzled and relieved. I was puzzled because I didn’t know who this God Mammon, and relieved because I surely didn’t worship him! That let me off the hook. But God and wealth? Notice that the scripture doesn’t say, “Try not to worship God and wealth, or even don’t worship God and wealth.” It says, “You can’t worship God and wealth.” You can’t. It’s one or the other.

Surely I don’t worship money. After the last few days I’m not so sure. You see I realized on Friday morning that I didn’t have my purse. I’d had it at the Session meeting on Thursday night, but on Friday I couldn’t find it anywhere. It wasn’t in my car. It wasn’t in the house. I called the Habitat

office and asked them to go to the church and look for it, and they couldn't find it. I'll admit to you that I had this sick feeling in my stomach. I had more money in it than usual, but, more important, there were also credit cards. Finally, on Saturday I discovered that our custodian had found it and put it in the closet for safekeeping. Do I worship money? Well, I must confess that I worried, not about what things I might not be able to do for God, if my bank account got wiped out, but about what I wouldn't be able to do with the money for myself--for what I wanted. And being out of touch with my money for a few days made me very uneasy. Would I be as uneasy if I were out of touch with God for a few days? So I had to take a serious look at myself and my commitment.

Let me share with you a little bit about a man who has it right--a man who uses his creativity, who thinks outside the box in his work for God.

I read in the L.A. Times yesterday about Cecil Murray, who at 75 is retiring from First AME Church of Los Angeles. He has been at the church for 27 years. In that time its membership has grown from 1000 to 17,000,. Celebrities, politicians, even presidents have worshipped there. Listen to what the article says:

But while those connections are useful, his heart has always belonged to black people. A fighter, he's taken on police brutality, insurance and bank redlining, gang violence, the three strikes law, education and homelessness. He's a port in any storm for poor families who need a place to live, for mothers burying sons, for entrepreneurs seeking venture capital. "Chip Murray has been a giant of a leader in our community," says John Mack, head of the Los Angeles Urban League. "He has been a tremendous bridge

builder across all ethnic and racial lines ... On his watch, First AME became a church that went beyond the stained glass windows.”...

What’s next?

Murray has no money. Unlike some ministers, he chose not to profit personally from any of the church’s deals. “He’ll give away his last dollar, “ his wife says. “and he’ll give away your last dollar too.”

We can’t all be like Cecil Murray. . but we can be faithful and generous with what God has given us and we can be sure where our loyalties are. We can be sure we worship and serve God and not money. And we can be a church that goes beyond our stained glass windows