

Games People Play

Luke 16: 1-13

Rev. Carrie Bail  
September 18, 2016  
Burlington, VT

Sing: "Games People Play"

"Oh the games people play now Every night and every day now  
Never meaning what they say now Never saying what they mean"

OK, 'fess up, flower children: who remembers that rock song from 1969? The singer's name was Joe South (which I forgot) but I remember the song and the peace movement setting. Yes, I am showing my age. Five years before that, there was a popular book by the same name, authored by psychologist Eric Berne. Who remembers that one? The book was his popular introduction of transactional analysis, the treatment model based on the idea that every human relationship can be broken down into one of three roles: Adult, Parent, and Child. Sixty years later It has largely been forgotten, but there was certainly some truth to it.

We human beings, and especially those of us who consider ourselves to be people of faith, think that we are rational and fair in communicating with one another, or at the very least we are honest and straightforward. In fact every conversation between human beings is entangled with emotions and old patterns of interaction we imprinted as children: the games that we play.

And the truth is, everyone could do a lot better in being open and direct in conversation through practicing some basic skills. But sixty years later, conversations have changed. Only a small proportion of them are face to face. Back then it was only letters or phone calls, but now we are talking about emails, texts, tweets, facebooking, snap chatting, and so much more social media that I don't even know anything about. Manipulation and falsehood only gets easier to pull off the further we are from one another physically. Indeed, we still play plenty of silly games when we communicate with each other.

Why am I talking about this old pop-psych phenomenon today?

Because this particular story from Luke is a pretty good example of the games people play. It is really tough to make sense of this passage. Looking back on thirty years of preaching, I have preached on this scripture only 3 out of 10 possible times.

Avoidance? Yes it is.

Nobody likes this story at face value. How could this be? In the rest of the gospel, Jesus teaches us to be honest and to love justice and to do kindness. How could he possibly be praising this shrewd (my word for it is sneaky and greedy) head servant who tells lies and cooks the books for his own advantage?

Why is this a person to emulate? Why would Jesus tell his story? This is someone who steals not only from his boss but also from his fellow servants, just because he got fired. Yuck. Let's skip this one, and pretend its not there. Especially on this first day of Sunday School.

Lucy asked me last evening if this lesson was going to be the Word of God of all ages. "No way." I replied. I can't even get this story to make sense to adults, never mind kids!

But you know what? It is often these tougher Bible passages that can yield insights after being wrestled with for a while. I am not alone in this. Reading the comments of scholars over the centuries, and preachers from the age of internet, you'll find that no one has really come to a consensus about its meaning. There are dozens of interpretations but not a one where you can say, "Aha! That's it!"

So let's start at what is the basic bottom truth of the story. You might say it's about getting a pink slip, about losing your job. The landlord was most likely not around very much, and this servant steward was in charge of the money. Word got back to the landlord that he had been cheating, and of course it was simple to get rid of him. In Biblical times unemployment was more of a disaster than it is now, because there was no safety net below: no

unemployment insurance, no social security, only digging ditches and feeding pigs, so to speak. This steward, although he has been highly trusted by the absentee landlord in keeping the accounts, is not a free man. He is a slave. He serves at his master's will. What would happen to a demoted slave in those days? I don't know: was there the expectation that he will work in some lowly position still on the estate? Or does it mean he has to leave completely and become a beggar? Will he survive, without income? Will his friends and/or neighbors help him, because they understand what it means to be desperate? None of his peers are in the top 1% either.

The landlord calls the steward's behavior "shrewd". In Greek the word is "phronimos", most often translated as "mind". It is the same word as in that lovely passage from Philippians 2:5 "Let the same mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus" The idea here is to apply one's intelligence to a particular problem, to keep it on the front burner of problem-solving..

But there've been all kinds of explanations of this passage. Saint Augustine thought someone else had added the story to the wisdom sayings and attributed it to Jesus. Another scholar thought it was hyperbole, exaggeration to draw attention to the wisdom sayings at the end.

Still others surmised that the steward had overcharged previously and was conveniently going back to rectify his injustices and make friends. My own explanation has always been that the steward was just “buying” friendship in the village so that people would be kind to him when he showed up later at their door.

Here’s an old story about some people who were REALLY resourceful and shrewd in resolving their problem. Henry Ford, the inventor of the original Model T automobile, was visiting his family’s ancestral village in Ireland in the 1930’s. Two of the trustees from the local hospital heard that he was in town and made an appointment to see him. They got him to donate \$5K to the local hospital, which was a small fortune in those days. The next day in the town paper, the headline read “American Millionaire Gives 50K to Local Hospital.” When he saw the paper, Ford was angry, and he demanded that the two trustees come back into his presence. ‘What does this mean?’ he said, waving the paper in their faces. ‘Oh what a terrible mistake in the type,’ they said, and apologized profusely. They promised they would get the editor to print a prominent retraction in the headlines the next day, with the clarification that the great Henry Ford had not given \$50K, but only \$5k. Ford fumed about what that would make him look like, and on the spot he agreed to give them another \$45K but with one iron-clad condition and that was this:

At the front entrance of the new hospital there would be a marble plaque inscribed with this clever message from scripture:

‘I was a stranger, and you took me in.

A Rev. Paul Larsen says “Too often, when adversity comes our way, we tend to freeze up, to pull the covers over our heads, and simply give up. We become overwhelmed. We reassure ourselves with Murphy’s law: if something can go wrong, it probably will. We decide that our number is up, the fickle finger of fate has pointed our way, and we give up.

We do this not only in our personal lives, but also in our social lives. We look at the problems of racism, world hunger, crime, pollution, economic injustice and say ‘What can I do about that? I am only one person.’ And so we do nothing. It is easy for us to circle the wagons, to move into a defensive posture, and to hunker down because we feel powerless.”

In this parable, Jesus is trying to counteract the sense of powerlessness felt by guy on the street, the peasant, Use your mind. Take the offensive. Parlay the talents you’ve been given. Do this not only to promote your own self-interest but to contribute to the future that God intends for everybody, not just the rich landlord. Seize the moment when it’s time to act on behalf of God’s Kingdom.

Do not worry about tomorrow, but trust in the one who holds the future for us. Worrying and hunkering down won't do a speck of good. The future is in God's hands, and the trick is to allow God to take us to new and surprising places.

Jesus tells us this outrageous story, one that offends most of our moral sensibilities and sets our values of honesty and careful management on their head. Here we're invited to imitate the person who through bold and unconventional moves takes hold of a future that is open and surprising.

What serves us, in the end, is our ability to cast our lot with the whole community of God, with people who are in right relationship with one another. Toward what end are we laboring? If we only think of ourselves, or one of the other worldly idols, whether it be money or fame or power, all of the shrewdness comes to no good end. But if we pursue love of God and God's community with the same intensity, we have tremendous potential for the future.

Let's give to God's Kingdom the same shrewd and thoughtful effort that we that we often give to our own personal worldly success. This is a great lesson for the children and youth in our midst. Do we give them a good example: to act as if our spiritual growth and love of God is more important than our status, or our bank account, or even the upcoming election? Probably not.

What if as stewards of God's household on earth, we fought for God's justice and righteousness just as hard as this steward fought for his own survival. What a difference we could make in the world. There is one God, and one creation, and this scripture invites us to cast our future with the love and care of it. We are invited to the place where love reigns, and no one will suffer injustice or scarcity, where all work together for the common good. No one ends up left behind in the bottom of the economic heap. God's future is there and open to us, if we put our minds to it. We are invited to be resourceful in seeking a future full of justice and peace, so that some day our God will commend us for our shrewd and mindful behavior.

AMEN



## Amos

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." 7The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

## Luke

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. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." 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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." 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." 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. 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. '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? 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.'

## Assurance

Now that we have let go of the pain, the bitterness, the anger of our lives, let us be kind, tender-hearted, and gentle towards each other, forgiving as God has forgiven us. We are God's beloved children, and will model God's grace and love in our hearts. Thanks be to God! Amen.

## Benediction

Go forth, children of light, ready to work hard for the Kingdom of God.

The God we worship is the one who brings the freedom and justice of the Kingdom to us, calling on all of us to do our part.

Go in peace, and serve God!

## Prayers

Sally's ordination

Start to Sunday School and those dedicating their time

Betty Carter

Concerns: two memorial services this week

Explosions in NYC