

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Luke Looks at Money: Making Friends”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Leviticus 27:30-32, Luke 16:1-9

She was that employee. She was that employee that everyone knew and trusted. Nacina was the Walmart employee that everyone would turn to if there was some sort of issue. She worked with the police to solve thefts in the store. She was the employee who made sure that people with difficult return issues were dealt with kindly and fairly. She was trusted so much that she was given a prime place in their cash department. So it was a shock to the employees and to the police officers that knew her when she was arrested for theft...and not just theft of a few dollars but theft of almost a quarter of a million dollars. It began with taking fifty dollars to cover the cost of her medications. When she noticed that no one seemed to notice, she began to take more. Eventually in one day she took more than \$8,000. As one officer told a reporter, most people would not try and take that much money in a month, but in one day?” Though she has not been convicted, the DA said that there is little doubt that she will be and that her sentence will range from a minimum of five years up to ninety-nine. In a sense it is the old saying that if you do the crime then you will do the time. All of which raises the question...what is going on in Jesus’ head as he tells the story we read this morning?

I ask that because by all accounts it would appear as if the manager in Jesus story commits the same kind of crime, but instead of doing time is complimented by both his boss and Jesus. Let’s review the story. A wealthy man has someone managing his money and property. For some reason it comes to the owners knowledge that his manager is cheating him. The owner asks for the books. The manager realizes that the jig is up. He also realizes as he puts it that he is not strong enough to dig and ashamed to beg. What to do? The answer is that he can cheat his master even more, make some friends and hope that one of them will employ him after he is dismissed. This is exactly what he does. He has his masters debtors change their accounts payable invoices to reflect less than they owe. Now, if this was the first story, the man would go to prison and have to repay his master. Instead though, his master who has now been cheated twice, commends the man for his shrewdness. So what in the world is going on here? Why doesn’t the master have the manager jailed?

The answer to these questions can be found in taking a quick time trip back to the first century and hearing the story in context. Let’s begin by pointing out that both characters in this morality play are scoundrels. Those listening to Jesus know that the master is a scoundrel because it is the only way he could have become wealthy enough to have a manager. In First Century Judea most landowners were small farmers who struggled to make a living and feed their families. Often they would need a loan for seed or other expenses. According to Jewish law, no interest could be charged on those loans. However, the way lenders got around this was to demand repayment in goods rather than cash; and the cost of the goods was as much as 100 % higher than the amount borrowed. When the farmers were unable to pay, the lender confiscated their land, which is how they became rich enough to have managers over their extended properties.

What this means then is that when the manager approaches the people who owe his master money and tells them to cut their bills, he is actually asking them to do what his master should have done, and that is to return only the amount borrowed. This is why the master then commends him, because the master as one scoundrel realizes that he has been had by an even better scoundrel, and that he, the master can do nothing about it.

This however raise a second question and that is why would Jesus even use this kind of scoundrel laden parable? The answer is twofold and lies in Jesus contention that “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” What Jesus implies first by this is that those who are shrewd know the power of money and what that power can accomplish. They know that money spread into the right hands wins friends and influences people. They know that money is a powerful tool to get one’s way in the world. In this election season we have to look no further for a modern day illustration of this than the Super PACS that are spending money like they can print it. The people who give to these PACS are not giving out of some great sense of altruism. They are giving because they want something and know that their gifts will win them friends in high places. They expect something in return for their dollars; access, legislation and other favors. I am not saying that this is the way it ought to, or not to be. All I am saying is that we live in a world very much like Jesus’ where money talks, and talks loudly. The children of this age are shrewd in dealing with their own.

What Jesus implies secondly by this is that the children of light, meaning the children of God ought to understand the power of money as well. They ought to understand how money can be a force for good; for the re-creation of the world. Remember that Jesus had nothing against money. He did not want his followers to be poor beggars roaming the world. He did not think that there was any great advantage to being poor. Instead what Jesus wanted people to see was that the money they had been given by God had and has the power to win friends and influence people...meaning the people who have little; meaning the poor; meaning the dispossessed. I say this because Jesus told stories about when you throw a party don’t invite those who can repay you, but those who cannot. In the beatitudes he reminds us that the blessed are the poor, meaning that they have a special place in God’s heart. And if we do so, it will be them who will be our friends waiting to welcome us into “the eternal homes”.

Doug was walking down the aisle of his local grocery store. It was where he normally shopped and so he was paying little attention to his surroundings. Suddenly he heard the sound of someone running rapidly toward him. He turned, looked and was suddenly engulfed in this immense hug from a man he did not know and could swear he had never seen before. All the man could say was, “Thank you. Thank you.” Finally when Doug removed himself from the embrace he politely asked the man who he was and why he was thanking him. The man told Doug this story. He had been homeless. And one of the reasons he was homeless was that his vision was so poor that he could not read a job application or a instructions given to him by an employer. Then one day he heard about a free eye-clinic for the homeless. He went and there were people there who treated him with respect and helped him get a pair of glasses. One of the first people he could then see well was Doug, who was there as a volunteer (and unbeknownst to this man, one of the financial supporters of the program).

The man finished his story by telling Doug how the glasses helped him get a job and now he was no longer homeless. Doug had made a friend that will welcome him into the eternal home?.

You and I have that same kind of opportunity if we are willing to see our money as a powerful force for good; a force for good through this church as well as through hundreds of other organizations that impact the lives of those like the man who hugged Doug. My challenge to you on this day then, is as you prepare to bring forward your pledge card, see it as a way of using your money for the good...to change lives for the better.