



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Shrewd Faith Luke 16:1-8; I Timothy 2:1-7

Sometimes I wonder if Jesus did not have a dark sense of humor. It seems that, at times, he liked messing with people. Most of his parables were straightforward. You have a lost lamb and go searching for it. You misplace a coin and look for it. You have a lost child and welcome him home. Even though, because of time and culture, the particulars of the stories are different for us, we understand them because they are easily relatable.

Then Jesus comes up with a parable like the one about the dishonest manager and nothing about it makes sense to us. In our world, anyone caught embezzling funds or stealing property is immediately dismissed and often charged with a crime. There is nothing praiseworthy about what they have done. In Jesus' story, however, before he clears his desk, boxes up his family photos, logs off of his computer, and is escorted to the door, the dishonest manager is still at it! As soon as his angry boss sends him packing, he is on the phone cutting deals with his clients, reducing their accounts, and continuing to bilk the company of its rightful income.

When Jesus dropped this bombshell of a parable, I imagine a thick silence shrouded the crowd. People looked at each other with puzzled expressions, scratched their heads, and mouthed "What did he say?" And though it is not at all in Luke's text, I imagine Jesus breaking the silence with a hearty "Gotcha!", slapping his knee, and laughing until he began to cry.

What messiah in his right mind would suggest that we take as our model for faith someone who is a thief, a cheat, and a scoundrel? We might as well call an ecclesiastical council and beatify Bernie Madoff as a saint!

When Jesus composed himself, wiped his eyes, and winked into the crowd, he directed a steady gaze at everyone staring dumbfounded at him. "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation," he said, "than are the children of light."

"Shrewd"—it's an old word dating back to the thirteenth century with its roots in an ancient Greek term. Luke used the word *phronimos* to suggest an

inner attitude that controls our behavior. It's tied to wisdom and good judgement. Shrewdness is a word and an attitude we value, at least in the business world. That was Jesus' point. You want to be shrewd in conducting business and making investments, but you ought to also be shrewd in those things that matter most in life, namely faith.

I will admit that those of us who preach tend to be the worst transgressors of this spiritual attitude. We want you to accept the things we tell you at face value. "Trust us," we say, "because we have the education, the training, the experience, and the inspiration to discern the truth of scripture and the ins and outs of the spiritual life. Believe what we say."

You should be able to trust us, but our education, training and inspiration do not set us apart. I know nothing that you cannot know for yourself. A friend of mine who is completely refurbishing an older house reminds me that you can go to YouTube and learn how to do practically anything related to home renovation. Granted, he and others like him are far more skilled at carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work than I am, but the basic knowledge is available to every one of us.

So it is with matters of faith. There is nothing that I know about scripture that you cannot also find out for yourself. I realize I risk putting myself out of a job to admit that fact, but it is true. Information about the Bible, about church history, theology, and all of the other matters of faith are available to you. What matters is what we do with that information.

In Jesus' day, that was not the case. The Pharisees and scribes were among the educated class. They purported to be informed and enlightened and loved to trot out the 613 laws that governed Hebrew life and thought. They would hold these laws over the heads of the people and use them to keep the people in submission. Jesus challenged such spiritual tyranny.

In the Middle Ages, matters were even worse. In Jesus' day, young men learned to read the scripture from scrolls and had the opportunity to learn from the rabbis. Centuries later in Europe, many people were illiterate and the priests of the Church were often the only ones in the community who could read and write. Peasants had little or no direct understanding of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. They were not even allowed to handle the elements of communion for fear their clumsy fingers would fumble the body and blood of Christ!

Shrewd people like John Wycliffe were horrified at how little control individuals had over their own spiritual life and how easily personal religion

could be manipulated. He advocated for and worked on a translation of scripture into the English language. Martin Luther followed suit and translated the Bible into German so that his people could read the Bible for themselves. Johannes Gutenberg created the printing press so that the Bible might for the first time be put directly into the hands of the people.

Such projects were often met with resistance because many clergy did not think that common folks like you and me ought to be handling the sacred matters of scripture. The ideas of these reformers were not at all new, however. Jesus had talked about them with his followers many times as we have heard into today's lesson. "Be shrewd in matters of faith," he said.

Jesus took his cues from the prophets, the spokesmen God used to speak truth to his people. If you want to observe someone acting shrewdly, pay attention to Nathan who went to King David and skillfully told him a parable about a wealthy man who stole a poor man's ewe lamb. The King was outraged until the prophet revealed that the King himself was the accused who had taken Bathsheba for himself and had her husband Uriah killed in battle.

Isaiah called for justice. Jeremiah chastised his people for abusing the poor. Hosea rebuked his fellow Israelites for chasing after other gods like his wife Gomer chased after other men. Amos reported God's disgust over the emptiness of his people's religion and cried, "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness to call God's people to repentance and to prepare them for the Messiah. And Jesus kept stirring the pot by telling people that they ought to be shrewd—astute, clear-eyed, and sharp-witted—about their faith.

To be certain, Jesus did not mean that faith is nothing more than information and how we use it. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding," advised the Proverbs (Proverbs 3:5). Faith involves the whole person. The ancient Hebrew affirmation of faith, first voiced on the sands of Sinai, declared, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). When challenged by Jesus to reveal what scripture taught about obtaining eternal life, a lawyer recited those same sacred words and added the kicker that we must love our neighbor as our self (Matthew 22).

We are to employ our entire personality—heart, soul, mind, and strength—when it comes to our faith. We must be shrewd. We must be wise. We must think about what we believe. We must act from our hearts.

An article in last Friday's edition of the *Telegram* included a story about a group of Holocaust survivors known as "Avengers" who sought revenge against Nazis for the murders of millions of Jews during World War II. Several members of the group infiltrated a bakery in Germany that served a POW camp which held a large number of SS soldiers. They brushed a mixture of arsenic, glue, and water on three thousand loaves of bread, enough to kill 12,000 soldiers. 2,200 of the soldiers became ill, but none died.¹

As I read the article, I reacted in several ways. The Holocaust was obscene in its quest to exterminate all Jews. I understand the desire for revenge. The war itself was a retaliation against such atrocities and an attempt to stop further killing. This plot for revenge, however, seemed just as wrong as the systematic killing of Jews had been. Courts were being set up to deal with these war crimes. Justice was sought. Would pure revenge achieve any good at all? Is this the reaction God wanted following such a deadly and destructive war? What does our faith have to say?

We are faced with these kinds of issues every day. We just passed the fifteenth anniversary of the attacks of 9/11 and those wounds are still not healed. There is a brutal war ongoing in Syria and throughout the Middle East which periodically spills over into other countries, including ours. Other attacks on people for various reasons plague our world. People are assaulted in a night club. Houses of worship are targeted. Young Black men are killed by police. Police are killed by young Black men. Hispanics are looked down upon as the new "lower class" of citizen. Auto accidents take some of the brightest and best from among us. Diseases curtail life far too soon. The economy improves for some people but continues to leave many families vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, and hopelessness. North Korea flexes its nuclear muscle and taunts South Korea and Japan with illegal missile tests. What does my faith have to say about such things? What does your faith say?

In the context of the parable Jesus told, several things are evident. First, simply quoting scripture is not the same as speaking biblical truth. If that were the case, we could all cheat our employers and be justified as long as we were wily and creative about it. We all know that it is possible to find

¹Aron Heller and Randy Herschaft, "Holocaust 'Avengers' Hit Back," The Associated Press, *Rocky Mount Telegram* (September 16, 2016) C1-2.

a passage in scripture which, out of context, will support just about anything you can dream up. As the effort to justify slavery in the South proved, our prejudices and biases can easily be propped up by scripture. We also know that Jesus did not let the people of his day get away with such abuse of scripture or people. Nevertheless, the same practice continues to this day. Scripture is not to be used to support our biases but to discern God's truth.

Second, just prior to sharing this parable, Jesus had offered the three parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In each one, he emphasized God's ongoing search for us and his happy welcome when we are found. That grace extends throughout the world and across time. What do those parables tell us about how we should act as people of faith?

Third, the story which follows this odd parable tells about a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus who begged at the man's table for scraps to appease his hunger. The rich man ignored Lazarus' pleas for food as well as the festering wounds that covered his body. Both men died. Lazarus enjoyed the feast of heaven but the rich man, used to feasting, now endured torment such as Lazarus had never known (Luke 16). The parable is about the danger of ignoring what God makes obvious to us. There is no part of life which our faith does not touch.

We are often reminded that we live with one foot in our world and the other in heaven. That does not mean that we concern ourselves with nothing other than getting that other foot into the clouds. It does mean that we must figure out how we can bring a little bit more of heaven to earth so that we do not feel so alien here and other people can experience the goodness of God with us.

We have to be shrewd-wise and discerning. We have to think about our faith and what it means for us today as well as what it meant for the disciples nearly 2000 years ago. We need to take scripture seriously, treat it as the treasure it is, and learn from it. We have to figure out what Jesus meant when he said certain things and how he might say them today. And we have to do that together. You have understanding and so do I. Together, we can come much closer to the truth than we can apart. We need one another and our insights and sensitivities. We need one another's inspiration. We need to be shrewd together.

The dishonest manager was smart and quick thinking. He knew he was not fit to dig ditches or perform other manual labor. His asset was his brain and he used it to help himself by putting other people in his debt. Sadly, he forgot about his heart. His unscrupulous heart could not see the wrong in

taking what did not belong to him. It could not understand how mistreatment of other people hurts them in many ways. The text tells us that his master complimented him for being shrewd, but it does not say that he let him off the hook.

Faith is a powerful force in the world. Think about all of the good that is done every day by people of faith. Think of the good things you are motivated to do because of your faith. Scripture is an amazing gift, a fascinating story of God's relationship with his people. It reveals to us the way in which God wants us to live together in this world so that we will live forever in the world that is yet to come. There are false prophets in the world who distort the Good News embodied in scripture. There are people who peddle a version of the Gospel which Jesus would not recognize. And there are a lot of people, like you, who seek to live out the Gospel day by day, as Jesus taught us to do—often with a sense of humor. Be shrewd and be faithful. God will be pleased and others will be blessed!

September 18, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Supplication

We think of you and a dozen different images come to mind, O Lord. There is the sweet baby born into our lives, vulnerable like us, and loved by his parents. There is the boy on the brink of adulthood, curious and bright, seeking answers to questions that we ask today. We see a young man eager to step into his role in the world, professing his faith, and seeking God's grace for the living of his days. We see a wise and compassionate man imparting the truth he has learned, sharing the love that fills his heart. We think of the horrible image of a man crucified for love and of the exhilarating image of him standing resurrected in a garden of life. Our thoughts of Jesus are many, O God, but they all point to your love and goodness toward us, and we are grateful.

We thank you for all of the help and care you offer to us and ask that you meet the needs that are before us right now. Friends are grieving over loved ones who have died. People are worried about illnesses that threaten life. Some of us fret over the next steps we should take and worry over decisions that must be made. We agonize over wrongs we have done and the people we have hurt. We nurse the wounds people have caused us and the pain that will not go away. We worry about our world and all of the anger and hurt that plays out in destructive ways.

You have experienced all of these things through Christ, O God, and we know that you understand. Move among us, we pray, to bring healing and wholeness. Settle your Spirit over our world so that hatred subsides, fighting ends, and peace, at last, reigns over us all.

When we think of Jesus, we think of hope, O God, and the ways in which he reminded individuals of their worth and inclusion in the family of God. Instill that same hope in our hearts and move us to share it everywhere that we go. Continue to teach us to trust you, we pray, bolstering our faith and increasing our reliance upon you in all things. We do look to you, O God, and are grateful that you look kindly upon us. Bless us, we pray, through Jesus Christ our living Lord. Amen.