



A sermon preached by E. Scott Winnette
September 22, 2019
Street Wise as Serpents
Luke 16:1-13

Today's dishonest-then-discounting-cook-the-books---fired-then-praised manager story is the most consternation-building, head-scratching, turn-the-page-to-another-story-PLEASE of the parables. What did/does Jesus mean? It very well can mean many things. Most plain readings seem unseemly, immoral. When faced with a parabolic interpretive conundrum test your interpretations by the rule of love. The rule of love means the interpretation of the text and actions derived from that interpretation should be judged by Holy Love. If the interpretation doesn't lead to greater love; spit it out and try again.

One reading implies the use of dishonest wealth is okay; the use of blood money okay; it's okay if used faithfully, for good? John D. Rockefeller's philanthropic sharing of his oil empire's enormous carbon-footprint-based profit comes to mind. Is the potential Purdue Pharma settlement okayed by this parable? Is it okay with God the future sales of OxyContin pay for drug-abuse-recovery?

Can blood money be okay if it secures our pensions. Our denominations say "no." The PC(USA) maintains a list of 57 corporations they do not invest pension funds in because of their involvement in military-related production, tobacco, human rights or operating for-profit prisons. Alphabetically the list begins with Aerojet Rocketdyne Holdings, Inc. (makes missiles), and ends with Vista Outdoors Inc. (makes AR-15 style rifles and ammunition). The PC(USA)'s controversial Committee on Mission Responsibility through Investment urges these justice-making policies filter down into the investments of congregations and congregants. I bet the next national gathering of Presbyterians, the next General Assembly, will add opioid makers to the divestment/ proscription list.¹

The UCC also promotes socially responsible investing, "As Christians, we seek to fulfill our stewardship responsibilities by ensuring that the investment of resources we manage reflects our faith values and God's desires for our world. Given the powerful role money plays

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/APPROVED-MRTI-2019-GA-Divestment-Proscription-List.pdf>

in our society and world, we want to be thoughtful in choosing investments that work for good.”² The UCC avoids investing in businesses who derive significant revenues from alcohol, gambling, tobacco, and military products. They also urge investors to use shareholder power pursuing equality with regard to board diversity, workforce diversity, indigenous rights, sexual orientation and religious discrimination.³

The beauty and bane of parables is that they act as stimulators for thought; they are not proscriptive rules; they are deductive riddles. The way money flows in our society; the ways goods are produced in our Global economy make it near impossible to locate good money, just money, holy money. All gold has tints of injustice. So, we faithfully do the best we can as we can.

A point of the parable is to make lemonade when life pelts you with bitter lemons. The manager may have been asleep at the wheel, but he jumps to aggressive action when he realizes the car was crashing, the boat sinking, his employment about up. We all bang up against the end of things: the end of a job, the end of youthful strength, the end of high metabolism. The parable teaches that ends can also be beginnings if we are shrewd, as street wise as serpents.

A very wealthy man told his wife that he wanted to take all his money with him to the grave; not a penny was to be given to her or the family or any charity or church. When he died against the counsel of friends, family, and even her minister, the wife dutifully fulfilled her husband's wish to be buried with his money. At the grave site as the casket was lowered into the ground there was a hushed silence. Finally, the pastor asked the widow, "How could you bury him with all that money?" "It was easy," she said. "I wrote him a check."

When whacked with being fired from a job, from health, from youth, from active parenting energetically, shrewdly, wisely mobilize. Jump up productively mobilizing all you got left and bust a move, defy complacency.

The manager seems to have been doing something naughty (squandering the boss' property). Had he stolen? Had he not used coupons? Was he deep in flagrant, manipulative nepotism? Had he piled on too many surcharges on the debts of the tenant farmers to line his own nest? He gets fired and then Robin Hood worthy cooks the books downwardly, discounting the debt.

There Is a Scrooge Effect in the parable. The manager once lowering the debts (buying the Christmas turkey) makes friends, creates good will. I remember my old accounting classes and how good will can actually be calculated, enumerated and keyed into a spreadsheet. The good will the manager created for himself when he cut a woman's debt in half, and another's debt by twenty percent also shined upon the owner of the debts. Maybe rich one was shrewd too and instead of erupting in fury saw he gained the favor of his tenants too.

² https://www.ucc.org/finance_investing

³ <http://ucfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/UCF-Proxy-Voting-Guidelines.pdf>

A biblical scholar revealed voluntary remission of debt a practice in the Roman Empire of wise wealthy landowners.⁴ While it lowered the profits of the moment, it created good will among debtors and promoted long-term productivity. The parable unpacks the line of Jesus' prayer, "forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors." It feels good to have debts forgiven. It feels good to forgive debt. So if you are owed money; consider if you can forgive some of it. And all of us can take the parable's money as a metaphor for those things we hold over each other. We can forgive emotional debt, expectational debt, relational debt forgiving, releasing, loving, making good will.

The parable ends, "You cannot serve God and wealth." You cannot serve God and the god of affluence, Mammon. You can't orient your life choosing Midas' gold over God, over God's ways, over creation, over family? Bob Dylan illustrates Jesus' parabolic statement.

Gotta Serve Somebody...

You may be a construction worker working on a home
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome
You might own guns and you might even own tanks
You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

The parable admires a frantic man for shrewd, last-ditch, dangerous creativity. Clearly, he was seeking to serve himself. Too weak to dig, too proud to beg, he needed new friends. Unbeknownst to him he serves to create good will, creates a new space, creates fellowship, demonstrates the paybacks of financial mercy. In his debt remission he serves the poor and the rich creating a new community. This manager unwittingly serves the God of community construction.

He is praised for not resigning, not giving up, not being lukewarm. This parable interprets another scripture, Revelation 3:16 "So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Don't be lukewarm when confronted with a roadblock in your story. Bust it up. Love with gusto. Hustle with verve. Serve God, serve Love with greater shrewdness than Wayne LaPierre's calamitous craft at promoting gun manufacture. Serve Holy Love with greater tenacious energy than President Trump uses serving his warped reputation. Serve Holy Love with the generative creativity of Steven King, Stephen Spielberg and Steve Jobs. If we are gonna serve somebody; serve God's good - giving with great gusto. Amen.

⁴ GOODRICH, J. K. Voluntary debt remission and the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-13). *Journal of Biblical Literature*, [s. l.], v. 131, n. 3, p. 547–566, 2012.