

“Street Smarts”

This lesson from Luke reminds me of playing a childhood game in elementary school called “Donkey.” It was a simple game where you throw a ball to each other, and if you drop it, you are given the letter “D”; the next time you drop it, it is “O,” then “N,” then “K” and so on, until having dropped the ball six times, you are a “Donkey” ... a “loser!” The trick is to throw the ball to the other person in such a way that it can be caught, yet is difficult. The game leads to all sorts of arguments, but that is part of the game. “I didn’t catch it because it was a bad throw” was one often heard argument. And the reply usually was, “It was a good throw, if only you had *moved* a little.” The object was always to make a relatively good throw, not straight at the opponent, but just enough that made the opponent move.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a “parable.” The word “parable” comes from two Greek roots. One of them, *bole*, means to throw, or “a throwing.” The other Greek root, *para*, means “alongside.” The person telling the parable is “throwing,” but throwing it far enough away from you that if you are to catch it, you have to be alert and move in order to catch it.

The parable Jesus tells in this week’s reading is probably the most difficult parable he ever told in terms of catching its meaning. Some scholars call the parable “The Crooked Steward”, because it concerns a crisis of the steward’s own making and the crisis is resolved in a questionable, even dishonest way. The ending suggests that the master not only found out the steward was crooked, but being a man of easy standards himself, and having some humor and detachment, he praised the steward’s ingenuity even though it was at his expense. I found it rather disturbing that Jesus would set one of his teachings in the context of such shrewd, cunning, and dishonest characters.

Our tendency is to paint a picture of Jesus as a gentle, sincere, and very serious fellow like a professor or a monk. However, if we step away from such stereotype images and give Jesus some range in personality, then his teachings open up new possibilities. When so doing, I found myself asking the question: “What if Jesus is once more mocking the religious establishment?” This approach makes sense if the Pharisees are in the audience and listening. Jesus enjoyed upsetting the Pharisees with his teachings, particularly if they ran contrary to their religious style.

In the previous chapter, Luke 15, the Pharisees were publicly upset, because Jesus was welcoming and eating with “the people of the land” ... tax collectors and sinners ... people like you and me. Jesus knew that the Pharisees were trying to discredit him. He also knew that they were attempting to win divine favor by giving small amounts of alms from their ill-gotten riches! The Pharisees were known as shrewd businessmen. Given these facts, I believe Jesus tells this parable using the familiar stereotype of the Pharisees’ own behavior. While engaging the Pharisees, I’ll bet the public loved it and were able to read between the lines.

I also think we can catch the meaning by focusing on verse 8: *the master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of lights.* To me this means that if Christians were as eager and straightforward in their attempt to attain goodness, as the people of this world are in their attempts to attain money and comfort, those persons would be better Christians. If only people would give as much attention to the things that concern their souls, as they do the things that concern their business, they would be better people. Again and again, people expend twenty times the amount of time and money and effort on pleasure, hobbies, entertainment, food, sports, lawn care ... than they do on their soul. One author writes: *Our Christianity will begin to be real and effective only when we spend as much time and effort on it as we do on our worldly activities.*

The key word for understanding this passage is *prudence* --- prudence in the context of one’s personal faith ... prudence as defined as practical wisdom, good judgment, and discretion. I think Jesus is saying: “Follow the example of the steward and leave no stone unturned to make your future secure” ... that is to say ... “Repent, for the kingdom is at hand.” We are to imitate the steward only in his prudence, not in his dishonesty. We are to be “street smart” in the ways of this world, as well as being careful to draw the line between “streets of heaven and the streets of this world” ... between God and mammon.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that they can learn much from “the people of the land” about salvation. We can learn much about our own salvation by being *in* the world, but not *of* the world ... by practicing our faith in the world, but not compromising that faith. For what gain do we have if we gain the whole world, but lose our soul?

I do believe this parable is about prudence, as well as determination. The Church of Jesus Christ in the pursuit of its mission must be as determined as the shrewd steward. Writes another commentator: *The world uses every available medium in selling its goods and putting over its ideas. The Church must be as equally resourceful in promoting the things that Jesus Christ stands for ... the world spends billions on armaments, believing that physical force is the ultimate thing in life. The*

Church of Jesus Christ must make adequate provision for the preaching of the gospel, the ministry of reconciliation, the relief of suffering, the abolition of illiteracy, ignorance, and prejudice --- believing that love is the Supreme power of the world!

Listen to this modern day story that may help you understand today's lesson. It is about a Presbyterian Missionary in the West Indies. It tells of an incident that happened in a church on Children's Day. All the boys and girls came to church wearing their Sunday best. Each carried a gift to lay at the altar. The minister noticed during the worship service that there was a small girl over to the side of the building that was not dressed in Sunday finery, and had no gift. She stood apart from the rest because she brought nothing with her.

At the close of the service, the minister asked all the children to march down to the altar and present their gifts. After all were collected and the children returned to their seats, the minister led the congregation in a prayer of consecration. After the "Amen," he raised his eyes, and noted that the girl he had noticed was no longer there. He looked about for her, but could not find her, until glancing back at the altar he saw the little girl sitting in the midst of the presents. When the minister inquired what she was doing there, she replied, "I had nothing to give, so I gave myself."

The fundamental, basic gift that we can give to God is our total self. We are to use our best efforts and talents in this world ... and then being faithful ... share what we have accumulated. There is an old Rabbinical saying, *The rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come.* Possessions are not in themselves a sin, but they are a great responsibility ... and the persons who use them to help the people who surround their life, have gone far to discharge that responsibility.

The early church father, Ambrose, commenting on another parable, the parable of the rich fool who built bigger barns to store more of his goods, said, *The bosoms of the poor, the houses of the widows, the mouths of children are the barns which last forever.* Our true wealth consists not in what we keep, but what we give away!

Here is another story I've told on other occasions, but it bares repeating. It takes place centuries ago in London where there lived a tight-fisted, Calvinist moneylender to whom a Jewish merchant owed a considerable sum. One day the moneylender proposed a vile bargain ... he would cancel the debt if the merchant gave him his young and beautiful daughter instead. Otherwise the debtor could rot in jail. Naturally the father was horrified at either choice.

The pious moneylender offered to let Providence decide the matter, saying he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag, and let the girl reach into the bag to choose one of the two without looking. If she chose the black pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be canceled. If she picked the white pebble her father's debt would also be canceled and there would be no marriage.

However, if she refused to pick a pebble, her father would go to jail and she would starve. Reluctantly the merchant and his daughter agreed to the test. As the moneylender stooped to pick up the two pebbles from the ground, the girl --- sharp-eyed with fright --- noticed that he picked up two black pebbles and put them into the bag. In that moment, with her life in her hands, she had to choose what to do. She could refuse, thereby sending her father to jail. She could expose the moneylender as a cheat, thereby stirring up his wrath.

Or she could take a black pebble, thereby sacrificing herself for her father. It was then she got a brilliant idea. She reached into the bag, pulled out a pebble and without looking at it, accidentally dropped it on the ground, where it was lost among all the others. She cried, "Oh, how clumsy of me," and added, "But it doesn't matter. If you look into the bag you'll be able to tell which pebble I took by the color of the one that's left!" The devout Calvinist wouldn't dare admit his dishonesty, so of course she won her own and her father's freedom. She wasn't dishonest, but she was prudent!

Jesus taught this and many parables on his two favorite subjects: money and material things. Jesus knew that nothing reveals the state of a person's soul so clearly as his or her attitude toward them. Money ties us to the world. It represents our work, our time, and our talents. When we give our resources for another's need or withhold them ... we are giving or withholding ourselves. It truly boils down to a question of priorities. Is the salvation of our soul ... our life's priority as we ponder eternity, or does our thinking stop short ... and our life here on earth is all we care about? The way we live our life and manage our resources answers these questions! The word for the day ... be prudent in your faith ... be street smart ... don't be a "d-o-n-k-e-y" ... catch my meaning?