

1 Timothy 2: 1-7
Luke 16: 1-13
September 19, 2010
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

One of the candidates who made a big splash on primary day last week was the winner of the Republican nomination for Governor of Delaware. A representative of the Tea Party movement she was hailed as a sign of the rising grass roots dissatisfaction, not just with the Obama administration but all entrenched political parties who, they claim, no longer serve “the people.” This populist impulse has a long and important tradition in our history and is a voice worth listening to even if we do not agree with it.

Soon after her victory word started to get out that there were some growing questions about her use of public campaign funds. It turns out that prior to the campaign this candidate was unemployed and it is alleged that she used public funds to pay for a number of personal expenses—some significant and expensive.

Now, when MJ first told me about this I was outraged. How could she get away with this? Why was she not being investigated and prosecuted? So, yesterday morning MJ told me that my wish had been fulfilled. There was an investigation being launched with a view toward criminal prosecution.

You would think that I would feel a sense of vindication and satisfaction at the just come-uppance of this candidate who uses the very dirty “tea” that she hurls in to the harbor for her own selfish gain.

I didn't. Indeed as MJ sketched out the story line I was shocked by a very different response. Instead of a gratifying sense of justice being meted out, I thought,

“This woman’s story is as American as apple pie.” Unemployed, sharp and motivated she pulls together a campaign and wins! Of course she takes advantage of public funds. She is at a disadvantage in relationship to her well heeled and party supported opposition who already have an unfair advantage! After all, throughout our history we have grown to admire the great captains of industry who born poor, worked hard, made shady deals and took government money to build railroads, steel empires, oil monopolies. We say that these great people “built America.” This is not dishonesty, greed or immorality. This is pluck, hard work and imagination!

This past June MJ, Ed Howe and I attended the opening game of the Tri-City Valley Cats. Who had the honor of throwing out the first pitch? It was Joe Bruno, who is possibly facing jail time for his misuse of public money. Truthfully, how many people are really upset with his crimes? After all, look at all the public money he brought to the Capital District. Sure he bent a few rules and broke a few petty laws; but who really suffered? How many more benefitted from his work?

I begin this way because I believe we live in a moral and ethical twilight zone. I am not so much outraged as confused and befuddled. And when I read the passage from Luke which we just heard, the candidate from Delaware and all the rest instantly came to mind.

Coincidence? I think not!

Jesus offers a parable that is itself an experience of the moral and ethical twilight zone. A certain manager has been caught embezzling from his employer and is summoned to the boss’s office with the certainty that he will be fired. Having stolen from his employer he goes on to cheat him further by cutting deals with those who are in

debt. He reasons that the employer will be satisfied to get some money back and meanwhile the dishonest manager has made friends who will take him in.

Singer songwriter John McCutcheon sings a song by Woody Guthrie which tells the story of old Cap Moore who allowed the neighborhood poor to steal bread from his employer's store and bakery truck. He feels ill used when the employer docks his pay and finally quits knowing that all the doors of the neighborhood will warmly receive him. The song concludes, "We could use a lot more people like old Cap Moore."

There is something appealing about this outlaw form of sharing the wealth. And so perhaps we should not be so shocked when, in the parable, the owner actually praises the crooked manager for being farsighted and in a twisted sort of way, virtuous. From the Great Train Robbery to Oceans Eleven we all love a good scam—especially when it serves some just cause.

Please note however, the manager was still fired.

What is more difficult to grasp is the lesson Jesus draws from this unedifying tale. He says outright that "the children of light"—meaning his disciples and all who follow him have much to learn from the crooks of the world. He seems to imply that whatever we have, whether we have worked hard for it or had a good return on investments estly—it is all "dishonest." Like the manager we should use this wealth in such a way as to insure our welcome into an eternal dwelling.

I don't know about you, but I am still in the twilight zone. I personally think Luke's Gospel would be just as strong without this messy little story. Yet to be honest, is not this the message that the church in the United States has been giving to us for years? You are affluent. You may be on the verge of bankruptcy. You may have several children

in college and a parent in acute nursing care. Your tax bill may exceed the cost of your groceries. Nevertheless when compared to 90% of the rest of the world you are affluent and are part of the wealthy class so condemned by Jesus. What is your only hope of salvation? Clearly, it is *not* believing that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior. It is giving your dishonest wealth away...to the church of course. And the really galling message is that if you do this you can buy your way into heaven.

Is there a way out of this quicksand? Yes. And I think the way out is fairly simple and straightforward. I believe that we entered the miry bog by focusing on the behavior of the crooked manager which then led us to misunderstand the owner's response as commending his shrewdness.

The true issue, I propose is simply this: single mindedness. People who make it in the world and become famous and wealthy and rise to high position generally have a goal and are single mindedly motivated to achieve it. MJ and I heard pianist Hilary Kahn perform at Tanglewood this summer. She started playing at age 2 and made her debut with the Baltimore Symphony at age 8. Cornelius Vanderbilt stated as a young boy by rowing people to Manhattan and by pluck and underhanded competition and judicious use of the legal system built a maritime empire which he parlayed into a railroad empire. Andre Agassiz in his book [I Hate Tennis](#), speaks of being driven at a young age to devote his life to being the best in the sport at the cost of his physical, emotional and spiritual health.

We on the other hand are rarely single minded. Indeed, most of us are torn apart by innumerable competing demands on our time and attention. Most of us feel like we are

doing equal injustice to all of the aspects of our lives: work and family being but two of the biggies.

Yes, to be truthful our dependence on money does play a role in this. It is not that our wealth and the things that wealth buys is dishonest or somehow tainted. The problem is that money cannot buy the one thing we most want and need: peace of soul and communion with God and our fellow human beings.

That is why Jesus concludes the teaching with the absolute assertion: You cannot serve both God and money.

I propose that the true message of this parable is that Jesus wants us children of light to be as single minded about seeking God and the peace that God alone can offer as worldly people are about seeking the things of this world. That is why in another teacher Jesus tells the disciples to “seek first God’s Kingdom and his righteousness, and everything else will be yours as well.

This does not mean that if you devote yourself completely to God you will also become rich and famous. It simply means that when seeking God and the peace that comes from God you will have the most precious thing life can give: a contented heart and a desire to serve. Amen.