



AUDITED BY GOD

September 15, 2019, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:1-13

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The parables for this Sunday and next are unique to the Gospel of Luke, as were two of the three parables in Luke 15 last week. For centuries, this is the parable that has caused the greatest consternation. How can this rich man, this “Lord,” fire the dishonest steward in one verse and by the end the story commend the guy for precisely the shady behavior that got him fired? And not only that—but *our* Lord, too, lifts up this scoundrel as a model to emulate!

Now, since a lot of you work in finance, I should hasten to say that Jesus is not counseling any of us, specifically, to engage in a little creative accounting or bookkeeping! Still, Jesus does tell his disciples that they, that we, can learn something from this rather questionable guy. How the “children of this age” are more shrewd, clever, and world-wise than are Jesus’ “children of light.”

In the first century, Christians were called “the children of light.” You’ll find the phrase in Paul’s 1st Letter to the Thessalonians and in the Letter to the Ephesians, too. It’s a beautiful phrase, isn’t it? “Children of Light.” I like it. It’s why I chose that middle hymn from the Glory to God hymnal our denomination now uses. I love the hymn’s sincerity and sweetness. Its innocence is so fitting on a Sunday when four precious infants were baptized into the church. When we sang that hymn together, we sounded just like what Children of Light should sound like, didn’t we? Pure, irenic: “Clear Sun of righteousness shine on my path and show me the way to the Father...shine in my heart, Lord, Jesus...”

Why, then, does Jesus tell his sweet children of light that it would help if we were a little shrewder? Why does he advise that we take a page from the playbook of the



‘children of this age’—the shysters—the ones who know how to look out for themselves, cleverly managing things—possessions, a crisis, their resources—so that their future is secured and assured?

Though this parable has confounded preachers and scholars, the preacher and scholar Fred Craddock once remarked that he didn’t know why we get so offended by the story. He wondered why we should be disturbed that Jesus found something commendable in a person who has acted dishonestly. Aren’t we all, he asked, a mixed bag of the commendable and the uncommendable?ⁱ

One of my most instructive adult life lessons happened on a street corner in downtown Atlanta. I was in my early thirties, when one is still growing into and trying to make sense of “the ways of the world.” I was headed to lunch with Carol Jean Miller, who was a bit older and a lot wiser and certainly kinder than I will ever be. I still remember the street corner where we stood, waiting for the light to change; how the church bells were chiming noon at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, our neighbor church downtown. We had found out that morning that one of the clients we had helped in the church Outreach Center, which Carol Jean directed, had stolen checks from the Center and cashed them all around town. I couldn’t believe it. David! The very man we had helped when he was down on his luck. David! Who had been so grateful that he volunteered in the Outreach Center for a couple of weeks. David! Whom we had come to trust so much that, when one of our staff quit unexpectedly, we hired him. Imagine the chutzpah! The greed! The moral turpitude!

I turned to Carol Jean and said, “I just can’t believe it! I thought David was a nice guy!” To which Carol Jean replied: “Kim, he is a nice guy. He is just also a thief.” There it was. So much, everything, in her simple response. It changed my perspective, and probably my life. “He is a nice guy. He is just also a thief.” Ever since, I have seen others and myself differently and better—more shrewdly but also more grace-filled. We all embody and act out of both what is commendable and uncommendable. How good, then, that Jesus sees that our faults and failings do not discolor our lives entirely.



This parable is at the heart of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's book, **The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness**. Published in 1944, the book is both a defense and a critique of democracy. It is disquietingly relevant again. Like so many theologians, Niebuhr wrestled with the state of things in the midst of World War II, the rise of fascism and the scourge of Nazism. Weaknesses and failures were evident not just "over there," but in democratic institutions, too, and in the Church as well. Niebuhr writes that the children of this age have no higher aim than self-interest. They know the power of self-will to pursue and win self- and national-interests at all costs. The children of this age know how, wisely and shrewdly, to set person against person, group against group, nation against nation in order to secure their interests in the ensuing chaos.

The children of light, Niebuhr says, wish to set self-interest within the bounds of a higher law and within the higher ideal of the common good. Children of light so believe this is possible, that we underestimate the determinations and manipulations the children of this age are willing to employ to get what they want. Then Niebuhr adds this warning: that we children of light not only underestimate their self-interest, we also underestimate how deeply self-interest pervades us, too, marring our best intentions.

If only the children of light were as dedicated to pursuing the future they want as the children of this age are to pursuing their self-interests. If we were as shrewd, determined and creative as they are...well, imagine how the kingdom of God and its justice and peace might flourish. Alas, we aren't so imaginative or determined or as selfless as we like to think. Niebuhr concludes: "The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of [this age] but remain free from their malice. He counsels us to "beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest," as individuals and collectively, for the sake of community, of the whole, of the entire universe."ⁱⁱ

One of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's rabbinic students told this story about her great-aunt Sussie. It took place during the time Reinhold Niebuhr was writing his book.



Her great-aunt Sussie was on a bus one day in Munich in Nazi Germany. On her way home from work, SS troopers suddenly stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most on the bus were simply annoyed, but a few were terrified. Jews were being taken off the bus and ordered into a truck around the corner.

From her seat in the rear, Sussie watched as the soldiers worked their way closer. She began to tremble and tears streamed down her face. The man next to her politely asked her what was wrong. “I don’t have the papers you have,” she whispered, “I am a Jew. They are going to take me.” The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. “You stupid woman,” he roared. “I can’t stand being near you!” The SS men asked what all the yelling was about. “Damn her,” the man shouted angrily. “My wife has forgotten her papers again! I’m so fed up. She always does this!” The soldiers laughed and moved on. Sussie never saw the man again. Never knew his name.ⁱⁱⁱ

But perhaps we know who he was: One of the children of light who put to use that day the shrewd, malicious wisdom of the children of this age. He beguiled, deflected, harnessed, and restrained evil so that this one, and in fact the whole—the very universe itself—might live and flourish.

Of course, not many of us will get to do something so dramatic as that. After all most of life consists in a series of seemingly small opportunities to practice being Children of Light. Jesus knows this, too. So he ends the parable saying: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. Jesus advises that no one can serve God and money or self-interest with equal devotion. One or the other will get our ultimate loyalty—and our soul.

Fred Craddock said, “I don’t know what’s big and what’s small. I was in the airport in Buffalo,” he said. There was a young man selling newspapers. “He left a stack of them and carried some of them under his arm, selling papers. A man, a well-dressed man, graying at the temples, saw the young man turn his back on the

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



little stack that was left, and he picked up one, leaving no quarter. Under his arm it went, and he walked away. ‘Ah—twenty-five cents. Don’t make a big deal. Here, here’s five dollars, don’t make a big deal out of it.’ Twenty-five cents. How small.

“I followed this fellow” Craddock continued, “into the cafeteria line. . . . We came to those little pats of butter—what are they, a nickel? He took one, lifted a saucer, and put it under there. And when he went by the cashier, he didn’t pay [for it]. That’s only a nickel—I mean come on, now—let’s get with the big stuff, it is only a nickel. In the courtroom it’s only a nickel, but in character it is a felony of the grossest proportions. . . . I don’t know what’s big and what’s small.”^{iv}

Reinhold Niebuhr shared our Reformed theology, knowing that we children of light harbor enough self-interest to make us more sinful than we like to think we are. He also knew that even when we sincerely work for the common good of the future God intends, we don’t come close to harnessing the energy, imagination, shrewd calculation, and firm determination displayed by the children of this age. One day Jesus said he admired that kind of chutzpah and thought his disciples needed as much courage and conviction with the business God has entrusted to us.

Twenty-five cents. Five dollars. A life—your own or someone else’s. The life of the world. Whoever is faithful in a little will be faithful also in much. And whoever is dishonest in a little will be dishonest in much. What’s big and what’s little? Turns out, everything is.

Amen.

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, **Interpretation: Luke** (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 190-191.

ⁱⁱ Reinhold Niebuhr, **The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense** (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 1-42.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lawrence Kushner, **Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary** (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996), 81.

^{iv} Fred B. Craddock, **Craddock Stories** (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1996), 82-83.