

“Hard to Imagine”¹

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13

William C. Pender

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Lewis Grizzard, a comedy writer, used to tell of a church revival where everyone begins to confess their sins publicly...until someone tells something that is beyond the acceptable vices of cussing, philandering, cheating the IRS drunken binges, and so on. Everyone becomes quiet after a certain confession of sin...and then after an awkward silence, a voice from the back says: “I don’t believe I’d told that, brother!” Today’s Scripture reading has been a troubling word for centuries in the life of the church—a sort of troubling word that sometimes we don’t think Jesus should “have told that.” It is often called the “parable of the unjust steward” or “the parable of the dishonest manager.” The troubling aspect is how Jesus draws a Godly or spiritual teaching from such a rascal. But it keeps coming back to the S-word...the stewardship word in our faith.

It takes a bit of imagination to get at this parable, and so the sermon this morning is a bit of a parable itself. Imagination is one of the characteristics that the Presbyterian Church asks of deacons, elders, and ministers. When we install new elders, deacons, and ministers, they are asked to serve with imagination. So, listen now to the text this morning and, with a bit of imagination, consider how it might fit in an officer installation service.

16 *Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³ Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

It was Sunday morning in the sanctuary. Rachel Lewis was there, at least in body. It was officer-installation day. The soon-to-be-installed officers were at the front and they were answering those questions that come out of the Presbyterian *Book of Order*. And questions began to drone on. Rachel was only partially-present. She was also present in her office, remembering things she needed to do Monday. She was also present in her childhood, remembering sitting between her parents and being forced to be quiet, like the child in front of her. And she was still present in the Sunday School class that had preceded worship.

¹ This is reworking of sermon preached in 1995, filename: lk16-18.95

Rachel was only partially present until her reverie was broken by a question addresses to the new officers: “Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”

She smiled to herself—energy, intelligence, imagination, and love? Energy...they seem to be some of the most the responsible members of the congregation. Intelligence...they could do more than walk and chew gum as the same time. And love—why else take on all that responsibility. But what about imagination? Then it struck her. That is what her Sunday School lesson had been about. The class had been about Luke 16:1-8, about that scoundrel that Jesus seemed to praise. Here was an employee who basically found a creative way to cheat...and there is praise for him...right there in the Bible!

In the class, Bill Epley had been the most vocal. Of course, Bill worked at the bank where several employees, whom he had hired and supervised, had been caught embezzling money. Bill Epley had said: “I know we are not supposed to question what Jesus said, but this manager, this steward as my old Bible called him, is doubly-dishonest. He gets caught by his employer once. Then as he is cleaning out his desk, he figures out a way to cheat his employer once again. He does it twice. And what does the employer say: ‘You gotta admire the ingenuity of such a crook.’”

Then Cassie White, who was sitting beside Rachel, chimed in: “It is not just that the boss praises his cleverness. Jesus himself says that children of this age are wiser, or at least shrewder, than the children of light. I don’t like this crook and I don’t like it that Jesus told this story.” Of course, thought Rachel, Cassie White had just had her driveway repaved. She had paid for asphalt but all she got was black tar and sand...which she discovered one day after the smooth-talking, sweet contractor disappeared—with her money.

Bill Epley and Cassie White, along with Rachel, all looked to their teacher, Joy Stevens. Joy shrugged her shoulders and said: “Well, I am no expert, but I think we have to distinguish whether Jesus is praising the dishonest manager or praising his ingenuity. In fact, this manager is such dastardly character that I wonder whether that is not a clue...a clue that we are not supposed to identify positively with the manager. The point of the parable has nothing to do with his character. The master of this crook and Jesus seem to praise the crook’s quick response to his difficulties and his creative solution.”

The discussion in the Sunday School went on, with some basic agreement that maybe Joy Stevens was right. Jesus was not commending crookedness; Jesus was commending energetic and creative responses. That’s why Rachel’s mind snapped to attention on that question asked of the officers of the church: “Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”

Imagination—that is certainly what that crooked manager or steward had demonstrated. He acted with imagination in order to care of himself after being fired. But can these officers... can this congregation...can the children of light (as Jesus called them) act with energy, intelligence, and imagination? And off Rachel’s mind went again.

Recently she had read what Mirsolav Volf, of Yugoslavian extraction, was saying about the deadly relationships between Christian Serbs and Muslim Serbs—they are killing each other. It was not a matter of ethnic-cleansing—they were all Serbs. It was more like neighborhood cleansing—killing

the people who lived beside for generations. Miroslav Volf said that people would have to learn to give up just reacting to what has happen to them. For the most predictable reaction is to do what is done to you—eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Miroslav Volf said that peace will come only when people say: “I am not going to act reactively but creatively.” That might work in other places than the former Yugoslavia: to act creatively rather than reactively.

That’s right, thought Rachel. How many times have I just reacted, paying tit for tat? “Don’t get mad, get even” was her mode of operation. Peace and other good things happen, she mused, when I act not reactively, but creatively. That’s what that dishonest manager did, thought Rachel. His reaction could have been to give up, but instead he acted creatively.

But can a church do that? Then she remembered that the churches in Union, SC, years ago had a intriguing memorial service for Susan Smith’s children...those children who were tragically drowned by their mother. And the typical reaction would be to make this service a time of shaking of heads at the inhumanity of humanity, even a time weeping and wailing.

But the churches in Union did not have that kind of service. They did not gather at the boat ramp where the mother had driven the car into the water with those young children strapped in their car seats. Oh, they could have had a “pity party” there. Instead they had a memorial service at First Presbyterian Church. And, Rachel had heard that at the end of the service the Presbyterian minister gave an altar call. Now that’s imaginative—when was the last time a Presbyterian minister gave call to come on down the aisle? Except this altar call was “Come on down the aisle and go the Fellowship Hall. Come on down the aisle and meet in our Fellowship Hall with the representatives from the various helping agencies in Union County. Find out what you can do to make a difference in preventing the child abuse that Susan Smith experienced, the abuse that was part of the chain-reaction that led to the death of her children.” In some ways, thought Rachel, Susan Smith was only passing on to her children the same kind treatment she had received.

Hmm, thought Rachel, that’s a church acting with energy, intelligence...and imagination. They are trying to find ways to break the chain reaction of abuse leading to further abuse. They are acting not just reactively but creatively. Children are so important. I guess that’s why we do Interfaith Hospitality Network and STAR tutoring here in this church.

At this point, the little girl in front of Rachel began to fidget—but only a little bit. Rachel remembered how hard it was to sit still as a child. At least since her time, someone had been creative and imaginative in adding children’s sermons to the worship service. But what struck her this Sunday was the energy and imagination of the parents of this little girl. The parents of this child had been a part of the Wee Worship Education. They had prepared a worship bag—a canvass bag which had printed on it: “My Worship Bag.” In it was a Bible coloring book, colored pencils, and a children’s story Bible. Each week that child would bring in her worship bag along with the children’s bulletin and clip board picked up at the door. Rachel admired the creativity to turn a problem—“sitting quietly in church” into an opportunity.

Of course, not all imaginative things work. She remembered the time preacher had burned incense in the service. She had learned what frankincense was, but the smoke and the smell had blurred about everything else. And then there was that associate pastor on a Palm Sunday, where the pulpit

area was covered with palm branches. He had stepped over behind one the great display of palm branches; then he pulled down a palm branch, peered out into the congregation, and said, “You Tarzan, me Jane.” It was imaginative, though it wasn’t particularly worshipful!

So, thought Rachel, she didn’t want to give up on imagination, even if some things flopped. Better to have imagined and flopped, than not to imagine at all!

Rachel tuned back into the service. It was the time for the offering. There was no energy or imagination in that. The church has to pay its bills. And sometimes that money was spent in ways she did not like, and, that made her hold back from doing what she could, perhaps even what she ought to be doing. Rachel thought: Give me that “old time religion”—new just meant more money. It is just hard to imagine how anyone could make some of the decisions that are made in the church. And then she caught herself in mid-thought. It is hard to imagine...Hmm. It is hard to imagine—that’s what she thought. And yet she so wanted individuals and she so wanted the church to be imaginative. Maybe, she thought, it is my imagination that is not what it should be.

Maybe my imagination is stuck in the past. Rachel recalled how she had been shocked about how stuck in the past she was by an article in the Wall Street Journal about, of all things, the inflation rate for Tooth Fairies: according to a survey, the average rate was \$2.64 cents per tooth and \$5 per tooth was not uncommon. When she was a child, it was dimes and quarters. Tooth Fairy inflation was more than double the historical rate of inflation. And thought Rachel, we wonder why the church can’t seem to get along with the same old contribution it always has. The Tooth Fairy is doing better than we are. And so she reflected, I guess we imagine that the church will just stay the same, while everything else goes up. Maybe we need to imagine again.

Energy...yes.! Intelligence...yes! Love...yes! Imagination? Can it be, as Jesus says, that the “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light?” This is the Word of the Lord.