

Tricky Money

Cynthia Lapp
September 23, 2007

Luke 16: 1-13

Trickster tales are found the world over. They are stories of how clever people save themselves when there seems to be no alternative. Remember Brer Rabbit? Or the Seven Chinese Brothers? That was one of my favorite stories as a child. The one brother was going to be unjustly executed. He had 6 other brothers that all looked alike and each had unique gifts (like stretching his body for hundreds of feet or enduring extreme temperature). By tricking the authorities night after night the brothers were saved from injustice.

In trickster stories one must use their wits to get what is desperately needed. Sometimes the desperation is not all that apparent to the reader, like in Genesis when Jacob tricks Esau out of his pot of soup. We know Jacob goes on to make a career of being a trickster.

Jesus often told difficult parables. In his attempt to illuminate some people and hide the meaning for others he told stories. Maybe Jesus was a trickster in that way? This parable today is so tricky that it takes four explanations at the end to clarify it. And it still seems inexplicable.

Luke sets it up like this. Jesus has been teaching the people following him as well as speaking directly to the Pharisees. The religious officials seem to dog him wherever he goes and try to catch him in inconsistencies. In Luke chapter 15 Jesus tells the “sinners and tax collectors” the story of the lost sheep who is sought out by the shepherd, then the lost coin found by the woman and then the lost son who is welcomed home by his effusive and forgiving father. These stories seem particularly suited for an audience of sinners with pious religious officials listening in. They don’t seem all that hard to grasp. But in the passage for today, Luke 16, Jesus turns specifically to the disciples and tells them this story.

“There was a rich man who had a manager for his land and property. One day he heard accusations that the manager was cheating the rich man out of money. So the rich man called for the manager and said, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me a spreadsheet on your management and money handling. You better believe you will not be my manager any longer.’

Then the manager said to himself, ‘Now what am I going to do? The boss is taking my high-powered job away. I can’t go back to manual labor. That would be shameful and besides I have gotten a bit flabby over the years. It would be even more shameful to stand in the median strip and beg.’

'What shall I do? Think man, think. I know! I haven't been fired yet. There might still be a way for me to land on my feet instead of the street.'

So, he called each of his boss' debtors. He asked 'How much do you owe the big guy?' The first answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' The manager said, 'Today is your lucky day. Take your bill, hurry now, let's rewrite that and make it 50.' He asked the next, 'How much do you owe?' The second debtor replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' The manger said to him, 'Let's make that 80, quick rewrite that.'

And the rich man applauded the manager because he had acted in such a clever way.'

We pride ourselves (in a humble Mennonite way) on being responsible and honest stewards of what has been entrusted to us. A story like this can make a careful, faithful person seethe. What does Jesus mean holding up the deceitful person as one to emulate? This is a family church; we don't want to be encouraging this kind of deceitful behavior in young people. Maybe this passage needs one of those disclaimers like I hear on NPR sometimes. "This is a sensitive topic and contains language some people may find offensive."

To make matters worse this lectionary passage falls on Pledge Sunday here at Hyattsville Mennonite. Does this mean we can write down false pledges? Steal in order to fulfill our pledge? Or is it more of a reminder to consider carefully what and who it is we are pledging to?

Maybe this really is a children's story. Maybe we shouldn't take it all so literally. One of the keys seems to me to be who it is intended for. This story is for the disciples, a motley group who has left their various jobs and homes and is following this itinerant rabbi around the countryside. It cannot be easy, not knowing where your next meal might come from, being on the move all the time, listening to these confusing stories, trying to stay interested when you might have heard them a dozen times before. We sometimes make fun of the disciples as not too bright. But what if they were just conscientious and cautious? Jesus tells them this story to let them know that for their part taking risks and trying a bit of cleverness might not be so bad. If they are going to make it in this world, and there is good evidence they are not, they will have to learn to be quicker on their feet

This story gives them an example of dealing with the establishment, with those in power. The manager is working for a powerful landowner. Probably neither the manager nor the owner is all that honest. But it is the manager who has been caught in deception. That won't stop him. He has more tricks up his sleeve to prevent his landing homeless on the street. He will cut his own profits and in this way make some friends. It is this quick thinking that earns him Jesus' praise: "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

If we don't know already – we are “the children of light” and it was those other people that gave Jesus (and his followers in any age) so much trouble that were “the children of the age.” Jesus is saying that the disciples need to go to “thinking on their feet” school as I heard it called this week. When you are in the underdog position sometimes you have to make decisions quickly, cleverly and with a lot of commitment. It may not seem like a good choice to those in power, to those who have the luxury of thinking of ethics first and results second. But sometimes sharp-witted ideas are the only power one has.

Menno Simmons was a trickster. As he was being hunted for his heretical beliefs and practices he had nothing to save himself but his wit and the kindness of others. A carriage driver gave him a ride. Soldiers stopped the carriage to search for the wicked Menno, asking “Is Menno Simmons in there?” Menno leaned over and called inside the carriage, “Is Menno Simmons in there?” And hearing no reply the carriage moved on.

This is in sharp contrast to the other hero Mennonites lift up, Dirk Willems. You might think that God was playing the trickster. Emaciated and weak Dirk escapes from prison and runs out over the thin ice to freedom. He is chased by the heavy guard who cannot make it across the ice and falls through. Isn't that a divine trick? But Dirk, in all his honesty and love, goes back to save the guard and then is killed anyway. Does duty toward love and humanity, toward God and Jesus' way sometimes trump saving ourselves?

Dishonesty is not usually held up as something to be mimicked in the bible. You remember the commandment, “Do not bear false witness.” But Jesus is not afraid of those who have made their living dishonestly. His disciples come from the chief cheaters: tax collectors, women who have been caught in adultery, plain old sinners. This story seems to imply that a little trickery is not always so bad if you can save yourself and the gospel message.

A little bit of political savviness is okay, even in the church. Think about the churches that provide sanctuary to those who are undocumented in this country. That is not only illegal civil disobedience it is also quite clever. What police force in this country wants to be caught breaking into a church and arresting an innocent person but for their immigration status? And besides, providing sanctuary is a genuine part of what we are called to as followers of a God who welcomes the stranger and the marginalized. (This congregation declared itself a sanctuary to people fleeing the civil wars in Central America in the 1980s though no one from Central America actually took refuge here.)

In a kind of ecclesial disobedience, we here at Hyattsville Mennonite have been told we are breaking church rules by welcoming gay and lesbian Christians as members. The case could be made that we were not savvy enough a few years ago when the conference began its inquiry. Maybe we should have taken some lessons from Brer Rabbit or Menno Simmons to save our vote. Right or not, we chose to stand together for justice and inclusion rather than try to find a political solution.

This parable is not often told. It is too confusing and easily misunderstood. And truth be told, I don't believe that we are called to be tricksters in all times and places. We know Jesus walked the excruciating path that Dirk Willems ran, not the clever path that Menno rode. Yet it is undeniable that we have these stories of quick-witted followers of God. May we be given the good judgment to know when to use our wit and when to trust in the wisdom of God.