

## Sticking It to the Man

series: *A Road Trip with Jesus*

Luke 16: 1-13

Have you ever gone on a road trip? Did you ever just get in the car and hit the road looking for adventure, or just looking to get away? Perhaps you were looking for a sense of freedom or going to visit friends or relatives. When you go on a road trip, you encounter new people and you gather stories. If you've been on a road trip, how was that experience meaningful and what was its meaning for you?

I took a road trip last spring. It combined a denominational meeting, a wedding, and a theological conference all scheduled and situated to fall within a two-week road trip. On the way, I visited lots of friends and relatives. I also had lots of personal time and space on the road.

The New Testament gospels depict several road trips Jesus took. He was essentially on the road most of the time, though on foot – not in a car. It's generally understood that Jesus, at some point of his active ministry, set off from his home region of Galilee and *set his face* toward Jerusalem where he was eventually crucified. In Luke's Gospel's telling of Jesus' story, this was a long road trip. Luke's Gospel is twenty-four chapters long and this road trip began in chapter ten, before the halfway point of the Gospel.

Over the next eight weeks, we will join Jesus on this long road trip -- on the way to Jerusalem. We will encounter interesting people and some unlikely heroes. We'll hear some stories that will probably challenge our thinking about Jesus and especially about our own life journeys. We will follow him into Jerusalem and hear him teaching in Temple there. We will find out Jesus' real values and try to learn from him.

The first story, today's story told by Jesus, is a really odd one. The hero is a shrewd and dishonest manager. Jesus seems to hold up this man, who is of questionable character at best, as a model for us. This guy is not easy to grasp as a role model – not like, for example, the Good Samaritan.

This is a difficult parable to figure out -- not clean and easy. The hero is a business manager, a steward, who is either incompetent or just dishonest. His boss finds out and requires a final accounting squaring of the books before the inevitable "You're fired!" It's a crisis for the manager. His cushy job is gone and options are limited. The best course for him is to make friends quickly and influence people. So he takes decisive action, falsifies records, and wins friends at the expense of his boss. In short, the man moves from incompetence and dishonesty to outright fraud. The kicker is that the boss, when he finds out, admires the man's resourcefulness. He's still going to fire him and probably won't give him a reference, but admires the shrewdness and strong instinct for self-preservation.

How is this guy a role model for us? Evidently, this guy is a good example for us to follow to the extent that he dealt with the realities of his life situation even though the problems were of his own making. He determines a pragmatic plan of action follows it through. Jesus suggests that the "children of light" – his followers -- should be so resourceful, though with higher ethics.

It's likely that this is an original parable of Jesus, or at least very much like a parable Jesus would have told. It's hard to understand, challenging, and confusing. The original parable ended with verse eight: "for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Jesus does not condone fraud, but commends shrewd action, telling his disciples, "Don't act dishonestly, but learn from shrewd people." This same philosophy is reflected in more recent times in *Management Secrets of Ghengis Kahn!* Jesus

challenges us to take clear and decisive action. “Be as clever as this unjust steward on behalf of the Kingdom of God!”

This story of Jesus’ is a parable, and parables are not allegories. God is not always in the story as a character, but the stories are always about God, life in God, and the meaning of your life in God. This parable has the potential to challenge us with how we handle our “mammon” – our stuff – and the way that affects how we handle our “true riches.”

Cleverness is a vital tool in life. It’s like being awake! Clever people don’t deny the realities of life. They don’t see faith as *pie in the sky*. They know that the hard realities here really matter. Church and religious leaders falsely lead people of faith to a passive dependence on God rather than teaching them to rely on their own God-given gifts. These gifts include resourcefulness, shrewdness, and creativity. The answers to our prayers are already in us. Our answers are all around us.

This truth applies to our stewardship of money, how we face our relationships, how we deal with death, and how we treat strangers. It applies to the stewardship opportunity given us in this congregation, in this building, and being in this neighborhood. It includes all you who are visitors checking us out. These life choices we make all reflect our true life values -- our commitment to God.

This is how we go about appropriating our potential, how we embrace abundant life. This is how we go about having that richness of spirit that leads to deep joy and deep happiness – by the choices we make and how we use the gifts we’ve been given. This process requires, at least at times however, an accurate and perhaps shrewd assessment of what we have to work with, what we want to accomplish – what are our gifts and goals. It requires a willingness from us to embrace those particular riches God gives us with enthusiasm.

That’s our purpose here at Crossroads Church. That’s why we work so hard to help people identify their gifts and clarify their life’s direction. That’s why we offer a series of *God’s Calling for Everyone* retreats. The pathway to abundance lies in strongly embracing God’s presence in our giftedness. That includes our brokenness.

All are welcome at Crossroads! That’s what our sign says and we mean it. Everyone is welcome here, but the reality is that not everyone who comes will stay. Crossroads’ approach to being church is not for everyone even if we’d like it to be. We question openly and that’s uncomfortable for many – even many of us. We mix up spiritual exercise and silence with systemic group dynamics. We throw in intellectually and emotionally passionate questioning together with rock & roll worship music. The lyrics of that music don’t always match our progressive theology and that’s part of our process.

We tend to prefer rock music for worship here at Crossroads. In the movie *The School of Rock*, Jack Black’s character defined rock & roll music with the words: *stickin’ it to the man*. That’s the origin of the title for this sermon. Crossroads Church was born into and in a counterculture. Our rock and roll worship style is symbolic our origins and upbringing as a congregation. It’s pretty easy for most people here to get with the idea of *stickin it to the man*. But that approach comes with some baggage. We can find it easier to be against stuff than for stuff -- easier to criticize than bring about positive change -- easier to focus on what’s in it for me than to submit to the best interest of the whole. Part of our corporate task is to recognize and deal with our baggage so that we can grow.

What baggage do you bring to living your life? More important, what are you going to do about it? This is essentially the same question faced by the dishonest steward in Jesus’ story. How will we deal with the baggage of our lives? In contrast to the steward’s handling of his

affairs, our challenge is to be just as clever and just as creative, but to act within the values of love, honesty, and integrity.

I went on a modified road trip last weekend. First, I flew to a family funeral in Virginia. After returning to Kansas City, I flew with my family to Atlanta for a family wedding. It was an interesting experience. One relative practices Reiki and claims to be a channel – someone who receives and transmits messages from people who have died. She gave me a message from my father. She also gave me a book written by a living psychic channeling the words of a deceased psychic about the nature of the transition to the spiritual plane and the purpose of life on this physical plane. I found myself having mixed emotions. I was hopeful, really wanting to have received a communication from my dad. At the same time, I was also skeptical.

The fundamental truth of that book, and of the message I received, connected for me because they reflect Jesus' teaching. The existence of life after death is a strong motivator for how we live now. And in so many ways, how we live here in this life affects our spiritual existence after we die. The author of that book says that the purpose of life on this physical plane is to correct imbalances, repay spiritual debts, and grow spiritually.

Without getting stuck on the question of whether you believe the idea that there is a spiritual realm among us and that we can communicate with those who have died, there a vital question all this raises. It there is truth in this idea that the overwhelming purpose of the life we're now living is to bring balance, or correct imbalance, in our eternal soul – to grow as an eternal soul -- what might that balance be for you? What do you need to be doing in this life to grow your soul? Don't you need to be seeking God's call for your life? Don't you believe that to love others and yourself will bring balance to your life?

Jesus, in the New Testament, tells us over and over that what we need is to love others, love ourselves, seek peace, and seek justice in every facet of life. That's why the church exists. That's why Crossroads exists: to support and guide us in that effort to spread this good news others.

The Word of God to us as individuals and as church is to move into the future we seek with clear and decisive action. God meets us there and prepares the way for us. All we need is already given. My invitation to you is to commit to give yourself to God's call for your life. Francis Dewar, the author of the little book *Invitations* that we're using as a guide for our retreats, wrote this:

If you have some idea of what God is calling you to, is there some step, however small, that you could take toward it? If you do not have any awareness at all of God's calling to you, is there some task or activity you would like to try, to see how you feel about it? Nothing will be clear beyond that step until you have taken it. (from *Invitations*)

It's not easy to do this, but little in life that is worth doing is easy. It's easier to do this in community. Come, walk with us at Crossroads into your future. Let the light of Christ who has walked this road of suffering and joy be our light, illuminate our way, and shine on us.