

## CREATIVE DISHONESTY

**Year C – Proper 20 – September 19, 2004 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

Today's story is a unique parable. It is a special story that the evangelist Luke has gathered. The central issue is the manager's dismissal for failing to carry out his duties. He is an incompetent stewardship. What's worse, he is dishonest. He has failed his boss. The parable challenges us to ask, "Where have we failed God?"

As the story unfolds, we see the dishonest manager engaging in creative financing! We all know what that is like. It particularly happens around April 15<sup>th</sup>. The owner confronts the manager and demands an accounting. When he the owner sees the manager again, he commends him for his creativity! In a crisis situation, the dishonest manager takes steps to ensure his future. I wonder who will want him later knowing how he operates?

Jesus is not telling us that he commends dishonestly. He is challenging us to use our creativity to help the Church have a future. Think about how people act in a crisis. We have witnessed people in the Southeastern United States take creative action as a result of multiple hurricanes that have struck. What creative gifts do we have call in a crisis?

What kind of world do we live in today? We are a people preoccupied with a focus on wealth. Just think about all the advertisements we are bombarded with daily. The right car will make us successful. The right odorant will attract a member of the other sex. The right credit card will buy us happiness. It's important that our appearances show how successful we are as people. It's all about spending, spend, spend!

We are willing to spend money about everything ... except when it comes to Church. Do you want to see Episcopalians run screaming from the church? Just mention the words stewardship or tithe! We are willing to buy many material things while the church struggles to make ends meet. We can be so creative in "dishonest" ways; we can run the charge cards up for this or that ... why can't we be creative when it comes to church?

We are dishonest with the gifts that God gives us. There will be an accounting someday. How do we use what God has given us? We are the dishonest manager in the parable. We waste so much. We are lazy. When we are caught, we cover our butt ... just like the manager. We are called to take care of God's world. We are called to be good managers. It's time for us to stop squandering God's gifts and take care of what matters.

Let me share an example with you. There are 425 families in the parish, but only about 200 pledges. The Average pledge is just a little more than \$1,000. I did some research on the average family income. The figure for Camden Count (not Cherry Hill or Haddonfield where the number was two to three times more than that!) is \$65,000. If my math is right, 10% (a tithe) is \$6500. We are a long way from that! Let's take half of that amount (the modern tithe) of 5% ... that's \$3250. We're still a long way from that. The national average for Episcopalians giving is 2.5%. That would come to \$1525 ... we still have a way to go.

At home we can be very materialistic. We want the Church to cut its programs because we are unwilling to give more. Who suffers because of this? We all do. Where's the

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creative instinct? Where's the connection with God? The subject of Jesus' parable today is money. Jesus had a vision that he held out to the first disciples and continues to hold out to us. He wants to see wealth redistributed. Jesus says we gain too much of our wealth dishonestly. He says we are unfaithful stewards and managers.

The reality of today bears that out. The poor share too little of our wealth. 2.5 billion people in the world live on less than \$2.00 a day! That's 10% of the population. That's about the price of a regular cup of coffee at Starbucks! Of those 2.5 ... 70% are women and children. Where is our creativity when it comes to caring for the poor?

This past week, four people came by to see me seeking help. I give out Acme certificates for food and Speed Line tickets for travel. I am almost out of funds. Where is the money for the clergy's discretionary funds to help people? There is no collection to help and the budget is stretched beyond its means. I usually rely on funds from baptisms, weddings and funerals to do this work.

**WE CAN DO BETTER.**

Dr. William Willimon of Duke tells this story about creativity. Imagine the following scenario. You have made a mess of your marriage. In desperation you engage in a fire sale of your own. You will do anything to save a compromised situation. In November of 1965, Linda Fuller told her husband Millard that she was leaving him. He was so absorbed in making money. He was making the unheard amount of \$1 million a year, not all of it honestly. He didn't notice that his family was slipping away.

Panicked by the wake-up call, Millard piled his wife and children into their Lincoln Continental and set off for Florida. On the way, they met some friends in Georgia. These friends had moved to Clarence Jordan's Koinonia community (an effort to live as a Christina community in the world). Millard agreed to have lunch with Jordan. He ended up staying a month.

Millard came up with a creative, crazed scheme. He devised a way many of God's children could get a new house for bargain basement prices. You might have heard of his organization. It's called Habitat for Humanity. We can do better!

This past week I met with other clergy and Bishop Council for an "information day." In it the Bishop spoke about the budget crisis that faces us. He said that there would be no call for a suffragan bishop until we met our National Church share. What was even more important was his sharing a vision for the Diocese. Bishop Council said that he would like to see us embrace the 2000 UN Millennium Goals. Do you know what the first goal is? It's to eliminate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015.

The Bishop said we can do better. We can be creative. We can be so clever in so many other things. Isn't it about time we were creative for God's Church? We have so much, and yet this parish ... and most others ... struggle to make ends meet. We are facing a \$30,000 deficit. When will do better for the Church?

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So many people struggle to feed themselves each day. We on the other hand struggle with obesity. When will we heed Jesus' call to care and feed the poor? When will we get creative? We can do better. Maybe the only question really is ... do we trust God enough to try?