

Mark Wehman

15th Sunday after Pentecost

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Amos 8-4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

09/22/2019

When Joseph Talese was an apprentice tailor in Maida, Italy, he made a terrible mistake. His hand slipped and he accidentally cut a slit in the trouser leg of an Easter suit being made for the head of a Mafia crime family. Disaster loomed. The proud and vengeful Mafia chieftain might very well exact a terrible price for his disappointment and there was not enough material to make a new pair of pants. As siesta time approached, the tailor for whom Talese worked closed the shop and ordered his assistants to pray for help with this frightening situation. In due course came an inspiration: the tailor cut an identical slit in the other trouser leg and sewed up both with an elaborate bird-shaped design. When the astonished mafioso tried on his new suit, the tailor explained that the wing-tipped knees were the latest fashion in the great capitals of the world. As proof, he pointed to his assistants: each of them now wore trousers with the identical sewn design. The don left, happily satisfied and in style.

Now let me ask you a question... Did the tailor do wrong in misleading the Mafia boss? Most of us admire the tailor's ingenuity, but technically he DID lie. His lie probably did no harm and probably kept him and his assistants from physical harm – but it was still a lie. That brings us to the Gospel lesson for this morning.

Why did Jesus make a hero of this unjust steward – this scoundrel? Certainly, it was not because of the steward's sense of ethics. What ethics? Like many people today, this man believed the end justifies the means. Can't you hear him rationalizing his behavior: "My boss won't miss this money. He drives a Mercedes. He takes trips to the Bahamas all the time. This money is peanuts compared to what this firm takes in every year. Besides, I'm desperate. I've got a family to support. There is nothing else I can do. I can't dig ditches. Welfare is out of the question."

There is nothing surprising about such thinking. People do it all the time. A man in Florida had survived Hurricane Andrew. One of his neighbors asked him, "So, what claims are you putting in?" The man had not suffered any damage to his home or car from the storm, so he answered, "None." The neighbor couldn't believe it. "Here's your opportunity to make a few bucks," the neighbor said. "The insurance companies are practically writing checks on the spot. How could anyone pass up putting in a claim for \$5000 for wet carpeting or a damaged car? After all, you've been paying premiums all these years. Why not get a little back?"

Does that sound familiar? The neighbor's willingness to give in to the temptation to falsify a claim is not that unusual. One-third of those polled by the University of Florida's

Insurance Research Center believe it's okay to falsify an insurance application. One-half feel it's all right to shade the truth in order to save on out-of-pocket deductibles.

This is the state of ethics in our society today. And that's sad. For one thing, we all pay for such chicanery. And secondly, it's getting so you don't know who you can trust. If people tell little lies, are they not at risk to tell bigger ones? What happens when the day comes when we will not be able to trust anyone? But you say, "Mark, aren't you stretching it a bit there?" I don't think so. We need a consciousness that it is always wrong to lie. It is always wrong to misrepresent the truth. Even when bending the truth is necessary, it ought to be done with a queasy feeling in our stomach.

For example, if you were hiding a Jewish refugee from Hitler's storm troopers, of course it would be permissible to lie. But still we need a consciousness that lying is wrong. Otherwise there is a danger that we will begin rationalizing far less critical situations and justifying falsehood with regard to those situations as well.

There is a moral numbness in our land. Polls are showing that more and more people are playing fast and loose with the truth. Where are we headed? What happens when we are no longer able to trust our spouses, our attorneys, our police? Jesus put it like this later in the same chapter, "He that is faithful in that which is least – is faithful also in much; and he that is unjust in the least – is unjust in much."

When Jesus chose this man to be the hero of this parable, he was not extolling the man's ethics. The man was a scoundrel. Why then did Jesus make him the hero?

Jesus was a man of action. It saddened him that many of his followers were good people but it was a kind of goodness that did not advance the kingdom. You can almost see the sad expression on Jesus' face as he concludes this parable with this commentary, "The children of this world are wiser than the children of light."

Now the church is a non-profit organization manned, for the most part, by volunteers. If this is the case, do we have a right to expect it to be run with the efficiency of a business? Why not? What if we were as good at what we do as McDonald's is at what they do, or Coca-Cola or Microsoft? What if we were as committed to spreading the good news of the kingdom of God as American business is to winning new customers?

This is the point that Jesus is trying to make. He wants people who bear his name to not only be good people but to be people who make a difference in the world.

Charles Spurgeon put it both colorfully and clearly years ago. He was preaching on a text from the book of Job that said, "And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them." "Yes," Spurgeon said, lifting his eyes with a kindly glance around the crowded gallery, "that is still the case. Some of us are always plowing, breaking up the fallow ground, preparing the ground for good seed. And others are feeding." Then he looked the congregation in the eye and said, "I know some of you dear people. You would not miss a service even if your life depended on it. Feeding, everlasting feeding. It is good to feed, it is necessary to feed, but do a bit of Gospel plowing as well, for the health of your souls and the glory of God. The oxen were plowing, but the asses were feeding!"

There's a powerful message in Spurgeon's mischievous words. Jesus got frustrated by people who were good but never did anything to advance the kingdom. Now please do not misunderstand. I'm not talking necessarily about heroic service. Sometimes the most meaningful acts of service can be the simplest if those acts are given with love.

Let me tell you about a man from the congregation I grew up in. His name was Lloyd Rousculp. Undoubtedly, Mr. Rousculp was a good man. But it wasn't mere goodness that made him smile. Mr. Rousculp was committed to a ministry of greeting every worshiper that came to church with a smile and a friendly "good morning". I remember him standing at the door wearing a bow tie every week. There were probably times when he didn't feel like smiling, but this was one thing that this elderly gentleman could do. He could help his church by his ministry of greeting.

I believe that everyone in this room this morning is a good person, and I hope you will leave church today asking yourself this question: What is my ministry? Am I plowing or just feeding? My guess is that Jesus used this scoundrel – this dishonest steward – to shock us into awareness. Being good is great – being honest is essential – but that is only the beginning of the Christian life. We've got a world to save from the powers of sin, death, and the devil. And the world will only be saved if each one of us finds our ministry and does it. God help us all.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.