Sunday, September 20, 1992
DID JESUS REALLY SAY THAT?
Luke 16:1-9

There are a number of teachings, stories, and sayings attributed to Jesus in the four Gospels that appear so outrageous that we want to ask, “Did Jesus really say that?”

The parable from Luke’s Gospel, which forms the basis for today’s sermon, is a good example. It’s a story about a very wealthy businessman who had an executive vice president running his business. Reports started coming to the owner that this executive vice president was not doing the job he was supposed to do. He was not following through on collecting the rent and managing the business. In business language, the “accounts receivable” were too high. He was both sloppy in his work and lazy.

In the story as Jesus told it, he does not indicate whether the charges made against the executive vice president were true or not. But it didn’t matter to the owner of the business. The rumors were flying that his business was being mismanaged, and that made him, as the owner, look bad in the eyes of his peers. So he called the executive vice president in, told him about the charges against him, and further told him to bring his accounts up to date and turn in his books for auditing because he was fired.

What was this employee to do? He knew it would be tough to get another job at his age. His health was not strong enough for manual labor, and he was too proud to become a beggar or to go on welfare. “I know what I’ll do,” he said to himself, “I’ll make friends with as many of the debtors as possible so they will each owe me a favor, and in that way, I can secure my future. If I reduce the amount that these people owe and collect maybe 50 cents on the dollar, some of these people might even give me a place to live if I need it. Most of them are behind on their payments anyway.”

Next, he carried out his plan. He summoned the debtors one by one and made a deal with each of them. If they would pay immediately, he would discount what they owed. When the owner of the business learned what his shrewd executive vice president had done, Jesus said, “He commended the dishonest manager.” Why? Because he acted creatively, decisively, and prudently in the face of a crisis situation. He saw the ax beginning to fall, and instead of giving up and saying, “Poor me, look what’s going to happen. I’ll never be able to survive this,” he immediately acted in a bold and clever way. He was commended for his creativity because he at least did something. He had only one opportunity to get out of the situation while ensuring his future. His “smarts” consisted in his ability to recognize that opportunity and make use of it.

It is at the end of the story that Jesus made what seems like an outrageous statement. He said, and I’m paraphrasing, “For the worldly are more astute than the other-worldly in dealing with their own kind. So I say to you, use your worldly money to win friends for yourselves so that when your money fails, and it will, you may be received into an eternal home.”

One translation has Jesus saying it this way, “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 home.” So we wonder, did Jesus really say that, and if he did, what does it mean?

In the first place, this is a story about money and our use of it. Surprisingly, Jesus had a great deal to say on that subject. Did you know, for example, that Jesus spoke about money more

frequently than any other subject except the Kingdom of God? He gave an unusual amount of time and energy to the money question. Not only did he have a lot to say about money and its use, but his actions regarding money would be embarrassing and outrageous to most of us today. In the moving story about the “widow’s mite,” we are told that Jesus intentionally sat in front of the treasury of the temple in Jerusalem and watched people putting in their offerings. By design, he saw what each individual gave and discerned the spirit in which they gave it. He knew that how much people were willing to give proportionately and the spirit in which they gave it and how they used their money in other ways told him more about their spirituality and their relationship to God than anything else.

Now let’s look at this story more carefully and especially at the outrageous statement Jesus made at the end of it. I have already noted that the main subject of the story is money and our use of it, but there are also some other fascinating sub-themes.

For example, why would the rich business owner commend his executive vice president for his shrewd handling of his accounts when he, the owner, lost money because of it, and what does Jesus suggest that we, his followers, can learn from this?

The rich business owner in the story commended his fired executive vice president not for his dishonesty, but for his creativity and shrewdness. One can imagine the rich owner saying to himself, “Now there is a man who knows how to take care of himself and me. He has made me look good in the eyes of my peers and my customers. Sure, I’ve lost some money, but I’ve saved face. He knows how to use money to take care of his future in this world.” The owner probably also thought, “He knows how to deal with people like me.”

By telling the story, Jesus was not approving the economic arrangements that the man had taken advantage of, but he was saying to the people of his time and to us that frequently we can be very clever and creative in questionable dealings, and if we were equally creative in our honest dealings and in our spiritual search, we would get along fine. Think how skillful and shrewd some thieves are in their stock market manipulations and other deals. If they were as skillful and shrewd in an honest way, they’d be way ahead.

More importantly, Jesus was using this parable to point out that many people are quite clever and creative in dealing with everyday worldly problems and decisions, but when we are faced with even more crucial situations in our relationship with God, we are not nearly so clever or creative.

In other words, we are to use our creativity and skill in doing God’s work in the world. I think, for example, of Charles Colson, who was a clever manipulator in the Nixon administration — too clever when he got involved in the Watergate scandal. But after serving time in prison, he has put his creativity and shrewdness to work in another very positive way — in ministry to people who are in prison.

The unique thing about many of the parables which Jesus told is that he realized that a certain amount of shrewdness and practical wisdom are necessary for living in this world. He told his disciples, for example, “to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Jesus never suggested that religious people are to be naive about the complex actions and motivations of human beings. Nor are we to be naive about the seductive power of money.

Not too many years ago, a man named Millard Fuller was a millionaire attorney and a very clever, creative individual. He used his creativeness and ingenuity to make a lot of money. He

had everything that a lot of people dream of one day having: big houses, expensive cars, a cabin cruiser, and more. But he was not happy. His marriage was in a shambles. The meaning of his life had eroded. It was a crisis, and he acted. He and his wife went away on a lengthy religious retreat to reevaluate their lives and their life together.

After much thought and prayer, they began to use their money and their organizational ability to begin an organization called “Habitat For Humanity.” Now in hundreds of places around the world, thousands of volunteers are building good, solid, low-cost housing for poor people. Whenever possible, the people who will buy the house with no-interest loans also help to work on their house. Mr. and Mrs. Fuller knew they couldn’t solve the housing problem completely. They couldn’t do everything, but at least they could do something.

But there’s more to the meaning of this story than even these practical suggestions about how to live in God’s world. As I said earlier, the central theme in the parable is money, or as Jesus calls it here, “unrighteous mammon,” or “dishonest wealth.”

By calling money “unrighteous mammon,” Jesus is reminding us that for too many people, money is “god,” or “the lord of an unrighteous world.” He is saying that too many people believe that money is the most powerful force in the universe and live their lives as if that is true. It’s ironic that we print on all of our paper currency in this country, “In God We Trust,” when for many people that’s not true.

Surprisingly, Jesus does not tell us to abstain from the use of money. Rather, he tells us to take this “unrighteous mammon” into our hands and to do something positive with it. The executive vice president in the parable, with all of his cunning, is intended to show us that money is not an end in itself.

Jesus was making the point that if a purely materialistic individual of this world can manage on his level to compel money to serve his ends and not let money control him, how much more should those of us who claim to follow the way of Jesus be able to do so on our level.

How many people are there in today’s world who are devoted to their possessions (their clothes, their investments, their bank accounts, their homes, their cars)—devoted to them as gods? Such people no longer own their money; their money owns them.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked one wealthy patient, “What on earth are you going to do with all that money?” The patient replied, “Just worry about it, I suppose.” Dr. Menninger went on, “Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?” “No,” responded the patient, “but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it to somebody.”

Strange as the actions of this executive vice president in the parable may seem to us, remember that he did not simply worship money; he did something with it. He has only a few days left. Soon, all the money and property he has managed will be taken from him. And one day, it will all be taken from us as well.

I once had an individual say to me, a person who was a very generous and giving individual, “What I give away, no one can ever take from me.” And he was continually giving money away for good purposes.

The executive vice president in this story uses money to perform a service. He is planning ahead for his earthly life, and we are to do the same for our own life here and now and after

death. The money will one day forsake him. If money is our god, it is a god that will one day fail us.

That is why Jesus makes this outrageous statement at the end of the parable. “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon,” or as another translation has it, “by means of dishonest wealth,” “so that when it fails, they may receive you into eternal habitations.”

The parable is reminding us that we can make unrighteous mammon holy. It’s all in how we use the money and the property that is ours to manage. Above all, we are to use money and not let money use us. We are to remember that everything in this life is transitional. One day we will be received into “eternal homes,” and all the money or wealth we possessed here is of no use to us anymore. Amen.