Sunday, September 24, 1995
WHEN IN TROUBLE, INNOVATE
Luke 16:1-13

Sometimes, we can better understand some of the more difficult parables of Jesus, such as the one read earlier, if we attempt to retell and understand the story in contemporary terms.

There was a wealthy American businessman who had an executive vice-president running his various enterprises because the owner himself had many other interests. As time passed, reports kept coming to this rich owner that his chief executive officer was not doing the job he was supposed to do. The charges, in general, were that he was wasting the owner's resources. One guess is that he was not following through on collecting rent and managing the business properly. In accounting terms, the accounts receivable were too high, and the profits were too low. Perhaps he was both sloppy in his work and lazy.

According to the story as Jesus told it, we do not know whether or not the charges were true; it's open to interpretation. At any rate, the owner called the manager in, told him about the charges against him, and said, "You have two weeks to bring your accounts up to date, and then your job here is finished — you're fired."

What was this manager to do? One possibility was to do everything possible in his last two weeks to collect all the money owed to the company in his accounts and to be as tough and demanding as possible, even foreclosing on property if necessary.

But then he considered another possibility. He had learned long ago that when in trouble, it's best to innovate. So he thought to himself, "Since I've been fired, if I want to secure my future, it's better to make friends with as many of the debtors as possible so that they will each owe me a favor. My boss is already angry with me; why should I make more enemies? What I need are friends. If I reduce the amount these people owe the company and make a deal with them — perhaps collecting fifty cents on the dollar — some of these people might even give me a place to work or to live if and when I need it. Most of these accounts are behind in their payments anyway, and fifty cents on the dollar is better than nothing at all. And that way, I can close all the accounts as well."

"I'm getting older, and my health is not good. It will be difficult for me to get a job. I can't do physical labor, and I don't want to go on welfare."

So he carried out his plan. He met with the debtors one by one and made a deal with each of them. If each would pay immediately, he would discount what they owed.

In his exit interview, he told the owner what he had done. It didn't save his job, but he was commended for his actions. It impressed the owner. Why? Because he acted decisively and creatively when he was in trouble. He was not afraid to innovate. He at least did something. His "smarts" consisted in his ability to recognize a problem and turn it into an opportunity.

When Jesus finished telling this story, he said — and I'm paraphrasing—"The worldly are often very astute and clever in dealing with their problems. When they meet a difficult situation, they are not afraid to innovate. So I say to you, use your creativity, and when you have a problem, do not be afraid to innovate."

Jesus was using this story to point out that many people are very creative in dealing with everyday problems and decisions in the secular world, but when they are faced with an equally crucial situation in their relationship with God or in their spiritual journeys or in their church life, they are not nearly as innovative.

In 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 he is saying to us, that all too often we can be very clever in questionable dealings, and if we were equally creative and innovative in our honest dealings, we would get along fine. Furthermore, we are to be as innovative as possible in doing God's work in the world.

I think, for example, of Charles Colson, who was a very clever man in the Nixon administration — too clever when he got involved in the Watergate scandal — but after serving time in prison, he put his creativity to work in another very positive way with a ministry to people in prison.

Or consider the many ingenious financial scams that individuals have concocted to defraud people. Suppose these same persons had used that ingenuity in a positive, honest, and legal way that would benefit others?

Again, the point is that the business owner in the story commended his resourceful executive vice-president not for his dishonesty, but for his creativity and shrewdness. He still fired him. One can imagine the 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 unique thing about the parables Jesus told is that he realized that a certain amount of shrewdness and practical wisdom are necessary for living in this world. In another place, he told his disciples to "be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Do not leave your creativity or your worldly wisdom at the door when you enter the church and do the church's work.

We are to use our resourcefulness to further the work of God, and if you can't do everything, at least do something. Above all, do not be afraid to be innovative and creative. The manager knew he couldn't collect all the money owed to his employer, but at least he did something.

Some years ago, a man named Millard Fuller was a millionaire attorney and a very clever, innovative individual. He used his creativeness and ingenuity to make a lot of money in honest ways. 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 unhappy. His marriage was coming apart. The meaning of his life had eroded. It was a crisis, and he acted before it got worse. He and his wife went on a lengthy religious retreat to re-evaluate their lives and their life together.

After much thought and prayer, they left their treasures behind and began an organization called "Habitat for Humanity." Now, in hundreds of places around the world, including Lincoln, volunteers are building good, solid, low-cost housing for and with poor people. As you know, our congregation is now intensely involved in this program. Mr. and Mrs. Fuller knew they couldn't solve the housing problem completely. No one can do it alone. They couldn't do everything, but at least they could do something, and that's all that God expects us to do.

The main character in the story was also commended because he planned for the future. I remember a cartoon I saw years ago which showed two men looking enviously at another

young gentleman riding by in a handsome carriage pulled by a team of horses. In the cartoon, one man was saying to the other, “He’ll never have to worry. His family owns the biggest horse carriage business in the world.” It has been said many times over that the main reason the horse carriage companies went out of business was because they thought of themselves as being in the horse carriage business rather than in the transportation business. And as a result, they didn’t plan for or see into the future.

What about the church? Are we innovative enough in our ministries? Many church congregations are not growing. Many congregations and denominations keep on doing the same old things. But the ones that are not afraid to be creative and innovate are finding new ways to serve people and bring the good news of God’s love to the world.

But there’s more to this story than even these practical suggestions of how to live in God’s world. It is also a story about money and its use. Listen again to the statement of Jesus at the conclusion of the parable—"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 homes.” What did Jesus mean with that statement?

Some Bible commentators have said that this parable is primarily about money and how we use it. It may surprise you to know that Jesus had a great deal to say about money. If you study the words of Jesus in the four gospels, you’ll find that he talked about money more frequently than any other subject except the Kingdom of God.

Not only did he have a lot to say about money and our use of it, but his actions regarding money would be embarrassing and outrageous to most of us today. In the story about the widow’s mite, we are told that Jesus intentionally sat in front of the offering box in the temple and watched people as they made their contributions. By design, he saw what each person gave and discerned the spirit in which they gave it. He knew that how much people gave proportionately, the spirit in which they gave it, and how they spent their money in other ways told him more about their spirituality and their relationship to God than anything else. With this background in mind, what did Jesus mean when he said, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes"?

By calling money “dishonest wealth,” or as an earlier translation has it, “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 is ironic that we print on all of our paper currency in this country, “In God We Trust,” when for many people, that is not true.

This does not mean that Jesus tells us to abstain from the use of money. Just the opposite — he tells us to take this “unrighteous mammon” into our hands and do something positive and good with it. Money is not to be an end in itself. Jesus was making the point that if a purely materialistic individual in 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 today are completely devoted to their possessions, their clothes, their investments, their bank accounts, their homes, so that these things become their gods? Such people no longer own their money and possessions. They are owned by them.

Dr. Karl Menninger once asked a 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 then asked, “Do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?” “No,” said the patient, “but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it away.”

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

The executive vice-president in the story uses money to perform a service. It is for that reason he is commended. The money, the property, will one day forsake him. If wealth is our god, it will in the end fail us.

That is why at the end of the story Jesus said, “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 reminds us that we can make unrighteous mammon holy. It’s all in how we manage and use the money and the property that God has given us to manage. Above all, we are to use creatively whatever wealth God has entrusted to us and not allow it to use us.

Who knows what crises or problems each one of us will face in the future? In this parable, Jesus is telling us that when problems come, we should act decisively and be innovative.

Above all, 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 will be of no use to us then. Amen.