

Jesus' Very Strange Petting Zoo— Luke 16:1-9 (and Matthew 10:16)
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 22 September 2013 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost

^{16:1} He also said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ² And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ ³ And the manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ ⁷ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ ⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. [English Standard Version]

¹⁻² Jesus said to his disciples, “There was once a rich man who had a manager. He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses. So he called him in and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? You’re fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.’

³⁻⁴ “The manager said to himself, ‘What am I going to do? I’ve lost my job as manager. I’m not strong enough for a laboring job, and I’m too proud to beg. . . . Ah, I’ve got a plan. Here’s what I’ll do . . . then when I’m turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses.’

⁵ “Then he went at it. One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master. He said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

⁶ “He replied, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’

“The manager said, ‘Here, take your bill, sit down here—quick now—write fifty.’

⁷ “To the next he said, ‘And you, what do you owe?’

“He answered, ‘A hundred sacks of wheat.’

“He said, ‘Take your bill, write in eighty.’

⁸⁻⁹ “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.” [The Message].

It happens. Life is rolling along, and then suddenly the carpet gets pulled out from under us. Mostly, our **success-defined culture** and **cultural religion** tells us that **(a)** it only happens to **other people**; **(b)** the person to whom this happens must have done something wrong; and/or **(c)** too bad for you.

In his book ***Falling Upward***, Richard Rohr (author of the book ***Things Hidden***, that we begin studying tomorrow evening) says that notwithstanding the fact that “***the carpet being pulled out from under us***” is a normal part of life that happens to almost everyone, the two people who seem to have the most trouble in dealing with that FACT are **(1)** people who are very rich/successful and **(2)** religious folks. Rohr says that this is how he understands Luke 16:8, **(the children of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light.)**

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message Bible* (printed on the tear off strip of the bulletin) interprets this passage as Jesus instructing that "Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

Both are pretty good interpretations. Most people with whom I discuss today's Gospel lesson, however, are pretty much uncomfortable with the whole Bible story. ***It just doesn't seem to be something that Jesus ought to be saying.***

It is a sticky wicket, to be sure. As ***Claude Rhule*** sometimes says in Bible study classes, "***Them's hard words!***"

They remind me of the words that Jesus spoke in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 10, verse 16:

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Being a Christian today doesn't seem much like that, does it? Sheep in the middle of wolves? Maybe sheep in the middle of vegetarians – where our biggest fear is the apathy of those around us. But, really, how dangerous is it to be a Christian in America today?

I've always thought that Jesus' admonition to be "***wise as serpents and innocent as doves***" is one of His most profound prescriptions for life, although so very difficult to apply to individual situations.

It is indeed a ***very strange petting zoo***, into which Jesus calls His disciples to enter:

Sheep grazing beside wolves. Snakes curled up beside the cooing doves.

We are to be shrewd as the wiliest con man, and yet fully focused on the Kingdom of God – where the end never justifies the means. Rather, the means are the end in the process of becoming. How do we hold these two things in our hands, so that we *never become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good*?

I wasn't sure of how to answer this question, so I went for a walk.

I was walking down a green grass path. Tree limbs bent down and across the path, so as to form almost a complete archway beside me on both sides and overhead. The grass was soft and wet; the morning fog was just beginning to burn off. It was quiet, with only a few migrating geese overhead, interrupting the still of the morning.

I walked along, and got myself into the right frame of mind, using my imagination to picture (in my mind's eye) Jesus walking beside me. He and I walked, in my imagination, with no words being spoken. We were just sharing the communion of silence that is so very special. I reached the end of the path, where it runs into a property line fence. I felt renewed. I felt at peace. I was grateful for this time together with the Master.

I said, "Amen," or "Thank you," I don't remember which, and then turned around to walk back to the house. I was so surprised when I turned around and actually saw Jesus walking down the path I had just traveled with him in my silent, imaginative prayer walk. But now, I SAW him walking. Down the same path toward me. He had on a faded sweatshirt, with raveled out sleeves, and a dirty baseball cap. He was carrying two cups of coffee. I just stood there, until I remembered to close my mouth.

He came up to me, handing me the blue cup, while he kept the white cup. "Beautiful morning, don't you think?"

"It surely is," I said. He walked along beside me for awhile, while we silently sipped both the coffee and the beauty of the morning. As we walked back toward the house, Jesus nodded his head toward a couple lawn chairs. I followed His lead, and sat down. He knelt over and looked at some of the plants growing close by, and then sat down in the chair beside me.

“I love the mornings. Mark got it right, in his Gospel, when he said that this was when I really liked to go out and pray. Is that what you were doing?” he asked me.

I figured He knew what I was doing this morning. Well, it was prayer, my walking in this quiet chapel, with my attention focused on his presence beside me. “Yeah, I guess that’s exactly what I was doing.”

“I could feel the wheels turning in your head, as you were chewing on that little story that Luke told. Thought I’d come and join you. I like sharing morning coffee with a friend, you know.”

“So, what was that all about, anyway, Jesus?”

“Well, sometimes I told stories that I just made up from whole cloth, just because they really packed a whallop – you know like the Good Samaritan story, and the Prodigal Son story. Not factual at all, but surely were truth.

“But this one. Well, it just happened to be one that I actually saw happen. Seems like the boss-man didn’t have the best ethical standards. And he’d heard that his manager was padding the accounts. He didn’t even give the manager a chance to tell his side of the story – just flat out fired him. It would never pass your “due process” employment standards of today.

“But, fact of the matter was the manager HAD cooked the books. The scoundrel boss had a scoundrel manager.

"It happens.

“But the manager was indeed shrewd. He used a method that debt collectors today sometimes use: *discount the debt in exchange for prompt payment.*

“What he did was to discount the debt owed down to the level that was actually owed, before the manager had cooked the books, in exchange for the debtor paying the cheaper amount.

“The debtors thought they were getting one over on the scoundrel owner-boss. Since they'd heard that the manager was getting fired, they figured he was just sticking

it to his soon-to-be ex-boss. They were grateful to him, and certainly weren't going to report him for his helping them out. Yeah, they had to come up with the pay back quicker than they'd planned, but it was well worth it.

“And the owner boss actually got paid what he was rightfully owed.

“Strangely enough, all the books were actually clean audits by the time the shrewd manager had re-cooked them; the boss had a great cash flow; and everyone seemed happy.”

“The owner commended the shrewd manager; did he go ahead and fire him?” I asked Jesus.

“I don't know. Probably. Had to save face, after all. He couldn't have allowed the guy to cook the books and get by with it, just by re-cooking them. And, besides, if he didn't, then people might have figured out that the two of them had conjured up the whole thing just to help cash flow. You know, there was the honor of it, and all.”

Forgetting myself for the moment, I said, “What do you mean ‘I don't know’? You're Jesus! I mean, even if you didn't see it, didn't you ... you know, ‘see it’ with your divine eyes, or however you omniscience everything?”

“Excuse me. I thought I was helping you out here. No, I didn't look into it anymore. I might end up messing up a perfectly good story that was both factual AND truth.” Jesus scolded me – with a grin.

“OK. I'm sorry. But why DID you tell this story? I know you said that it actually came out with a good ending. But, don't you worry about making a role model out of a crooked person?”

“Well, it's like this. If I only made role models out of people with perfectly impeccable credentials who never do anything wrong, I wouldn't have any characters for my stories. Besides, that's not how We work. Just look at the people who are the “heroes” of the Bible. What a bunch of what you call *losers* and/or *connivers*. BUT-

they are ALL beloved children, precious and beautiful to behold, of whom We are particularly fond.

“Here’s the upshot of it all: Everyone in this story had a little bit of scoundrel in them. They were all working the angles.

“The moral of the story is – and I guess that’s what you want me to tell you – although I’d rather you figure these things out yourself – the moral of the story is that the people in this story LOOKED AROUND FOR CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES. They did not allow themselves to be put into an “Either A or B only” situation. When we open our eyes, there are ALWAYS “C” and “D” alternatives.

“Look at the Cross. Was it only (A) send in the divine army of angels and escape on Calvary Hill, with the help of the divine calvary, or (B) die on the cross, a loser?

“No! There was plan C: the Resurrection, where Death is forever conquered.

“My Father and I want you to open your minds, open your hearts, be aware that We are always available to take the disasters of your life and turn them into something good – *if you allow*.

“And, please, don’t be like those stuffy Pharisees and only allow the perfect people to play the good parts in your life. Be a little less judgmental, and realize that I do some of my best work through people that you find ‘unfit.’”

“But what about the sheep and wolves, the serpents and doves?”

“That was one of my best turns of a phrase, wasn’t it? Ahh. You got ONE story answered today. Chew on that for awhile. The other ‘petting zoo’ characters (and I DID like that sermon title – one of your better ones) – we’ll take those one situation at a time. That’s the only way that one works.

“Next time, though”

“Yes, Jesus?”

“Next time, it’s your turn to bring the coffee.” AMEN.