

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
on 23 September 2007 (Proper 20):
Amos 8:4-12; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

God and Shrewdness

Regardless of whether the jury verdict against Kenneth L. Lay and Jeffrey K. Skilling is upheld, testimony from 56 days of trial has sealed what is sure to be history's judgment – one that is unlikely to be vulnerable to appeal...The Enron case will forever stand as the ultimate reflection of an era of near madness in finance, a time in the late 1990's when self-certitude and spin became a substitute for financial analysis and coherent business models. Controls broke down and management deteriorated as arrogance overrode careful judgment, allowing senior executives to blithely [sic] push aside their critics...the case painted a broad and disturbing picture of a corporate culture poisoned by hubris, leading ultimately to a recklessness that placed the business's survival at risk.

So reported *the New York Times* in its May 26, 2006 “News Analysis” article. From the sounds of this painful Enron remembrance from our own recent past, we might say that the dishonest manager whom Jesus describes in this morning's gospel parable was a minor leaguer in comparison. Yet, the Enron incident (and all those like it – known and unknown) and the tale of the parable with its dishonest steward connect through the ages and illuminate several key truths about what *real* life is *really* about.

There once was a man of great wealth who had a manager to whom he had delegated the running of his future's trading company. When a rumor began to appear on the business blog that there might be some financial hanky-panky going on in terms of the trading of these commodities, the wealthy owner called his manager into his office for an accounting. When it became clear

that, indeed, the manager had cooked the books and was using his boss's equity to leverage his own, personal portfolio, the owner unceremoniously fired him on the spot and demanded that independent auditors be brought in to straighten out the accounts. To add to this heart-stopping news, the wealthy owner's secretary popped her head into the conversation, alerting her boss in whispered tones that, as the owner requested, she had managed to reach the FBI on the other line.

The jig was up for the manager, and he knew it. Yet, true to his nature, the steward did not panic but set about with great cunning and even artfulness to address his situation. With a sobering self-assessment, he instantly reckoned that he had gotten very fond of his expense account and the other perks of his executive surroundings to earn a living on his feet such as at Home Depot or

teaching school. And going on welfare was out of the question, although he might arrange an appointment with his parish priest, nonetheless. In his prosperous days, he had felt the need to be on the membership roles only in name. Now, an appearance in the rector's study to express a renewed desire to get involved in things spiritual might not be a bad idea. Maybe when things quieted down a bit, he could even give a redemptive term on the Vestry a spin. But there was more needed from his plan, if he were to get by this squeeze and live to manage another day.

So, with as much grace as he could muster, the dishonest manager politely and contritely pivoted on his heels, left his former boss's office, and rushed down the corporate hallway to his desk. He hit the speed dial button on the phone and immediately got in touch with his biggest clients.

"Hello, Diane! How's it goin'?" Say listen, we've been doing business for years now, and our association has been good for both of us. I've got a situation here that is a win-win kind of thing, but the catch is that we both have to pull the trigger on it right a way. Are you with me so far? Ok: here's the deal. How much are you paying now for a barrel of oil? Right. Tell you what: Short-term, for the next week, cut it in half! That'll boost your margin for the month, and you'll be a hero. Deal? Good. Thanks, Diane. Yeah, you owe me one. Later."

"Hello, Herb, Frank here. Say listen, I've come across a piece of

information that I think you'll be interested in. One of my contacts in the Agriculture Department has given me a tip that the government is going to release the results of a study that say that changing corn into ethanol is not cost efficient. Yeah, that's what it's going to say. Right. That's what I was thinking, too. So, how many corn futures are you in for? Right, it's a good time to cut your exposure. I'll tell you what; let me help you out on the short side. Reduce your order by 20%. You're welcome; no problem. Yeah, we'll most definitely be in touch. Bye."

The following Saturday, the dishonest steward's boss was engaged to be the keynote speaker at a special conference at the Darla Moore School of Business. His speech was entitled: "Business Ethics in the Global Economy – Is It Sunday or Monday?" And to everyone's amazement, the wealthy owner began his remarks by recounting the incident with his dishonest manager, including how his former employee had managed to save his own skin through the shrewd manipulation of his own personal credit and assets. With a wry smile, the wealthy magnate looked up at his adoring audience and observed: "Now that's some action you will never be taught in an MBA class! You won't be taught that sort of thing because it can't be taught. And it can't be taught because such shrewdness, such savvy only comes from practical experience and a clear sense of what really matters. It's street smarts, my friends. It's a matter of what you're willing to live by that counts."

Jesus tells parables because they always contain a twist that is designed to catch us off guard. In some cases, the parables are designed to trip us up, lest we continue unawares. The parables always demand that we do more than operate out of our own expectations, pushing us to dare to see how God looks at things. So, when the Lord proclaims a commendation for the dishonest steward's shrewdness, who could be blamed for responding with a collective "huh?"? It just appears that Jesus is supporting stealing and lying and bald self-absorption. How can this be? What is his point?

Perhaps our dilemma can be reduced if we ask a question in several ways. For instance, about what was the dishonest steward shrewd? What did the owner see about the steward's behavior that deserved commendation? To what did the manager apply his "street smarts"?

I think the answer is: Relationships. In his own way, the steward began to ask himself what would save him, when his own plan for salvation blew-up. When his own efforts to make himself secure failed, when his perception that he was in control of his life proved ridiculous, when his aspirations to create himself in his own successful image proved fatally illusionary, what did he do? With a shrewdness that sliced through all his scheming and all the burden of his troubles, the dishonest steward immediately turned to relationships, to people he had known for his redemption.

And then what did he do? He made the people he knew grateful. He put

them in his debt. And that, I believe, is the source of the owner's commendation. The dishonest steward sobered up remarkably quickly to what is really real about life, and he found that relationships are eternal and that gratitude is the balm of life.

Implied in the parable of the dishonest steward are two fundamental perspectives of what life is about. One perspective comes from the world, and it drove the dishonest steward toward his attempts at a happy life.

The world tells us that we are not good enough, that we are lacking in what it takes, and that, not surprisingly, the world has, for a price, what might fix us and make us better. We are told virtually every minute of the day that there is something out there that we need that could do the trick for us; to make us happy. For a small fee or service, we could acquire this special something. We are told that if we work hard with it, really use it and believe in it, we might just make it. And if the first special something doesn't work, then there are alternatives that one can procure and try for a lifetime in order to be ok.

The mantra of the world's perspective on life is: "If you want to be happy, if you want life, then grab for all the gusto you can because you only go round once." To which the second verse of this worldly mantra is: "keep running hard; others are gaining on you and may take what little you have."

Contradicting this worldly view, the gospel offers us an alternative. It says: In Christ, God has already given us the life we need and cannot provide for ourselves. The catch to the gospel life – and there is one -- is that we are asked to say “thank you” for this gift and to share the gift not only with our lips but more deeply in our lives. That’s all there is to the gospel life.

The mantra of the gospel is “Eucharist” – which as you know is Greek for “thanksgiving.” “Do this in remembrance of me.” “Let us bless the Lord. Thanks be to God.”

There is a clear difference between the two, a big difference; and it often takes a shrewd, practical, street-smart sense of what is real to understand the difference and to be grateful rather than fearful and grabbing for our happiness.

The New York Times article that I cited earlier goes on to say this. “Those lessons about the importance of quality management and strong finances in avoiding scandal...have not been lost on the audiences that perhaps matter most: the managers of corporate America and the government regulators who keep an eye on them.” *The Times* concludes this observation by citing a business school professor’s comment. He says: “One of the things we know from social psychology is that incentives and greed really bind. And those incentives are still with us.”

Well, one of the things a mature Christian faith knows is this: “Those who do not have someone within

them who is above them will inevitably give themselves over to what is around them.” (P.T. Forsythe: Anglican Theologian, quoted the *Anglican Digest*)

Or as one Benedictine monk has written: “For happiness is not what makes us grateful; it is gratefulness that makes us happy.”

We are in relationship with God, through Christ. We are, therefore, Christ’s Body, God’s managing partners in the world, the Holy One’s stewards of creation. The role of a place like St. Martin’s is to be a resource, by which we remember God, tend the sacredness of our relationships, and work on our gratitude – even with shrewdness that comes from an ability to know in a pinch what really matters.

Thanks be to God. Amen.