

Title: Let's Make a Deal

Text: Luke 16:1-15

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While Laura and I were at Falls Creek Falls last weekend, I recalled a memory that occurs around this time, maybe a bit earlier, every year. While growing up in Arkansas, my grandpa and uncles would gather with my cousins and me for this peculiar hunting season. Instead of gun racks in the pick-ups, our hunters would drive around with old doors or sheets of plywood strapped to the hood of my grandpa's truck. We were in search of one of the most vicious of quarry, one capable of both slashing wounds and deep punctures. We needed to be careful as we cautiously crept towards, while lying on the hood of my grandpa's truck, but even as carefully as we were, one of its hundreds of arms was sure to inflict some painful scratches.

Does anyone know what we were looking for? We were picking blackberries. Is there any more well-protected fruit than this one? Some vines were extremely thick, with huge, curved thorns that hooked at the end. The smaller vines held the luscious fruit, but they too were armored. Small barbs surround the berries. Needle-sharp prickles covered the undersides of the leaves. Even days later, the broken-off thorns left raised places on the skin and caused pain.

Oh, my goodness, what a reward! My two favorite summer fruits are the beautiful, deep red strawberry and the sweet, juicy, and most enjoyable blackberry. My favorite Blackberries are not the easiest to find and gather. The slightly dulled ones were heavier and juicier than the bright and shiny ones, and I enjoyed them the best, because they were the sweetest.

Yet, I paid a price each time I went blackberry picking. My stained fingers were purple for days. I often left a piece of my shirt hanging in shreds on a vine. When I went to school on Monday, my friends would ask me about my arms and legs, which looked like I'd wrestled full-grown tigers.

Yet, one taste of the freshly baked blackberry pie, topped with vanilla ice cream that melts slightly from the heat. Yummy! Or my mom's jam spread on top of a hot, baked biscuit. Oh, my stars! I love this tasty fruit—my mouth just waters thinking of it. My favorite is the blackberry's cousin, called the Blackjack Berry. They are a little bigger than my thumb, and they are incredibly sweet.

So, what does this love of blackberries mean for us and this text? Today's gospel lesson presents a rather prickly parable of the shrewd manager, who himself poses a thorny issue. This dishonest manager is a particularly prickly person. "The dishonest manager" is an unlikable character. He seems shady and self-serving. This manipulating manager looks like an unlikely candidate to be selected as "a good example" because this wily guy wants the debtors owing to him as he slashes what they owe his boss.

Recall that first-century culture was organized and structured by strict social rules. The rules of reciprocal hospitality, which involved returning favors for favors, were not optional. We have a remnant of its legacy. Someone gives you something, and you feel compelled to return the favor. This thinking was much more precise and strict in the first century. The dishonest manager does not doubt that he will be able to collect on the favors owed him when the time comes.

Let's be clear: this story is thorny and troubling. What the man did or did not do to earn the owner's displeasure is not told. What the man does with the owner's debts appears to be a criminal act. But Jesus is not focused on the surrounding thorns of the manager's dubious situation. Neither does Jesus concern himself with the man's self-serving character. He focused on the fruit that is hard to reach and deep inside the center of the man's heart. The fruit comes from the manager's shrewdness. Jesus sees a man unafraid to push the accepted limits to bring about a needed change. He sees in this shrewdness something that his disciples and 'children of the light' might well learn from this 'child of the earth'.

The commentary Jesus offers after this story is the key that unlocks the meaning of this parable. Jesus emphasizes the effective and efficient use of worldly things for building relationships and hospitality. The manager accepts a reduced return on investment on behalf of and without his boss's knowledge to establish and cement relationships that his society wouldn't ordinarily embrace. In other words, Jesus' point is quite clear to us. Jesus wants us to examine our prickly hearts and ask ourselves if we are good stewards by carefully and skillfully using all of our gifts and talents to the glory of God.

I was once teaching this passage, and someone said, "This passage just does not belong in the gospel. It is useless and just wrong as a Christian to be dishonest." We all agreed and nodded in affirmation. But then someone spoke, and her response caught the attention of all of us. She said, "True, this text at first glance seems not to belong. Yet, honey comes from both the flowers and the weeds."

Maybe the surrounding context can help us a bit in understanding this prickly story. Recall this morning's passage, which follows the reading of two parables that illustrate how relationships appear unconventional to the rest of the world. First, the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame (14:21) come to the banquet table. Then the prodigal son (15:21) is celebrated and welcomed. Now we read about the debt-canceling action of a dishonest manager, and Jesus praises his action. These three stories are really about unlovely and undeserving people who cannot hide their less-than-respectable lives. And it is precisely right at this moment that our prickly people are turned into a delicious treat.

Friends, notice God's power is at work within them. These stories truly are tales of Amazing Grace from a loving God. Not one of the people in these three stories appears good on the surface, but underneath, we discover God's kingdom at work. Remember the story of the prodigal son, where the one person who is supposed to look good is the older brother, standing

outside the welcome-home party for his brother, arguing with his father about his brother's worth compared to his own.

This parable challenges who we value and hold up as our role models. We are a celebrity-worshipping culture. Our culture chases after the wrong things. We worship the perfect faces, perfect figures, and perfect physiques. We admire their seemingly perfect clothes, cars, and homes. We try to copy their perfection in our own lives, but today's prickly text challenges those thoughts and beliefs.

Life is not what we make it or remake it to be. Our purpose in life comes from a different source – God! We need to go deep into the briars. We need to go beyond the outer skin and into our prickly hearts. This text invites us to turn away from the mirror for a minute, and let something else get under our skin:

- Let feeding the hungry get under our skin;
- Let forgiveness of those who have wronged us get under your skin;
- Let a thirst for justice get under our skin;
- Let a desire for God's grace and goodness get under our skin;
- Let a hunger for things of the Spirit get under our skin.

Our outer skin-focused society costs a lot of cash. There are the cosmetic companies, the clothing industries, the fitness gurus, the plastic surgeons, the pharmaceutical companies, and the diet doctors, all of whom are making a lot of money. Our text challenges our conventional understanding of how the world works. Let me ask us a question for us to consider. What would happen if we redirected some of the money and time spent on ourselves, making ourselves look good, and invested it in doing good for others? What would happen? Would the fruit of our lives be like the blackberry?

John D. Rockefeller was known to be a troubled human being, some might call a dishonest manager. And maybe he was. He became the wealthiest man in the world, but he started as a clerk at \$43.75 per week. Even at that modest salary, he gave away as much as 50 percent of his income to his church every week, contributing to the betterment of others. Years passed. At fifty-two, he was extraordinarily wealthy, but he was also extremely sick. His doctors told him that he would die within a year. He thought back on his early years and the pleasure he got from contributing to others. So, he resolved to spend his last year giving his money away. He sold half of his stock in the Standard Oil Company and began to distribute his considerable wealth to various philanthropic efforts.

He began financing worthy causes nationwide. Something incredible happened. The more money he gave away, the better he felt. His health improved. His illnesses went away. He recovered completely. He went on to live to age 91, in excellent health. By the time he died, he had given away millions of dollars. Meanwhile, the value of the Standard Oil Stock he had kept had increased so much that he died with more money than he had when he was on his deathbed.

The truth is the Spirit's work is often messy and thorny. The Spirit works in unimaginable ways. Look at the ragamuffin band, who were Jesus' disciples. They are not pretty. They were rough around the edges. Jesus associates himself with those outside the elite and inner circles of politics and religion. He healed the lepers and talked to the Samaritan woman at the well. He ate with the tax collectors, and a woman washed his feet with her hair by using expensive perfume.

Here is the deal Christ is offering us this morning, and for the rest of our lives. I encourage us to make this deal. Sometimes our lives will be messy and thorny. We are to use what we have and build relationships, even the messy and prickly parts of our lives, which may not be pretty. We are to bring all we are – warts and all – to this table ever ready to serve the needs of the kingdom. So, let's make a deal. Whether our life is a weed, a flower, or a combination of the two, let's be of service and witness to God's amazing grace in the lives of others.

Prayer of Illumination

God of light, may the brightness of heaven shine through the scriptures today, and shine in us as we listen. May your Spirit speak to us and teach us to be citizens of your realm that is coming into being among us. Prepare us to go with joy to the feast you have prepared, through our Lord Jesus. Amen.

Luke 16:1-15

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be a manager any longer.'"

"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg! I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' "Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'

"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'"

"The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."