"HERO OR SCOUNDREL?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke
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INTRODUCTION When Joseph Talese was first starting out as a tailor in Italy, he one day made a terrible mistake. Apparently his hand slipped and quite accidentally he cut a slit in the trouser leg of a suit that was being made for the head of a Mafia crime family. Disaster loomed. The proud and vengeful Mafia chieftain might very well exact a terrible price for his disappointment. And even worse, there was not enough material to make a new pair of pants.

As siesta time drew nigh, the tailor for whom Talese worked closed the shop and ordered his young assistants to pray for help with this frightening situation. In due course came inspiration: the tailor cut an identical slit in the other trouser leg and then sewed up both with an elaborate bird-shaped design. When the astonished mafioso tried on his new suit, the head tailor told him that wing-tipped knees were the latest fashion in the great capitals of the world. As proof, he pointed to his assistants each of whom were now wearing trousers with the identical sewn design. The "Don" departed, feeling good...knowing he was "in style".

One wonders if the tailor did wrong in misleading the Mafia boss? Most of us admire the tailor's ingenuity, but technically...he did lie. His lie probably did no harm and probably kept him from physical harm...but it was nevertheless a lie.

ANOTHER STORY Let me share with you another story. A middle-aged man was in trouble with his boss. In fact, he had already been given the pink slip. Within a few days he would be through...finished...out the door. The man was terrified. He knew at his age he would have difficulty in finding another job...especially at the pay scale to which he was accustomed. Unemployment benefits would keep his family going for a while, but what would he do when they ran out? Disaster lay ahead.

Then he hit upon a plan. He was in charge of collections for his company. In the short time he had remaining with his employer, he decided to call each of his employer's creditors and offer them a deal. He told them he was leaving his present position to find a new opportunity and in order to keep their good will he was offering them a deal they could hardly refuse. If they were to pay their bills immediately, he would give them a generous discount....he would settle for sixty cents on the dollar...40% off. With crossed fingers, he assured them that he had been authorized to make this offer. And he hoped they would remember this act of good will when he came around to their company to drop off a resume. In other words, he was using his boss' money to buy good will with future possible employers.

Did this man wrong? Of course, some of you will say. He did...he wasn't authorized to give away his company's money like that no matter how desperate he was to find another job. We would say his behavior was inexcusable. This brings us then to the question for this morning. Why did Jesus make a hero of the man we're introduced to in the parable? For basically, this is the Parable of the Unjust Steward in a modern setting. Why did Jesus make a hero of this scoundrel, for He did...at least as I read this parable and reflect upon it. Let's take a closer look at this...
NOT BECAUSE OF THE STEWARD’S ETHICS

Certainly it was not because of the steward's sense of ethics. What ethics, we may ask? Like so many people today this man seemed to believe that the end justified the means. Doesn't take much imagination to hear him rationalizing his behavior.

"My boss won't miss the money. He drives a Mercedes. He takes trips to the Bahamas all the time. The money is peanuts compared to what this firm takes in every year. Besides...I'm desperate. I've got a family to feed. There's nothing else I can do...."

There's nothing surprising about such thinking. Why...people are doing it all the time in our society.

A man down in Florida recently survived a hurricane. One day one of his neighbors asked him, "so what claims are you putting in?" The man had not suffered any damage to his house or his car from the storm and so he answered,"None". Well, the neighbor couldn't believe it and said to him,

"Hey...here's your chance to collect a few bucks. The insurance companies are practically writing checks on the spot. How could anyone pass up putting in a claim for $5,000 for wet carpeting or a damaged car? After all, you've been paying premiums all these years...'bout time you got a little back...don't you agree?"

Oh, it sounds familiar. The neighbor's willingness to give in to the temptation to falsify a claim is not that unusual. One third of those sampled by the University of Florida's Insurance Research Center believe it's okay to falsify an insurance claim application. One half feel it's okay to shade the truth in order to save on out-of-pocket deductibles. Perhaps this reflects the state of ethics in our society today.

And that's sad...really. For one thing, we all pay for such chicanery. And secondly, it's getting so you don't know just who you can trust. If people tell little lies are they not at risk to tell bigger lies? Are we coming to the day when we will not be able to trust anyone?

But...some of you may be saying to yourselves, "Come now...pastor...aren't you being a bit rigid...inflexible here?" I think not. We need a consciousness that it is always wrong to lie...wrong to misrepresent the truth. And even when bending the truth is necessary, it ought to be done with a queasy feeling in our stomach. For example, if you were hiding a Jewish refugee from Hitler's Storm Troopers, it would be permissible to lie...of course. But still we need a consciousness that lying is wrong. Otherwise, there is a danger that we will begin rationalizing far less critical situations and justifying falsehood with regard to those situations as well.

There is a moral numbness creeping across our land. Polls are showing that more and more people are playing fast and loose with the truth. And one wonders where it all is going and taking us. Signals are up and the signs of decay are there for all to see. What will happen when we are no longer able to trust one another. I like the words of Jesus there in Chapter 16 of Luke and verse 10:
"He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much... and he that is unjust in the least is unjust in much."

**INGENUITY AND DRIVE**

When Jesus chose this man to be the hero of this parable, He was not extolling the man's ethics. That we can be sure of. This man was a bit of a scoundrel... he had a dark and shadowy side to his life. Our foreparents might have used the word "knave" to describe him. You ask then,

"Why did Jesus lift up this man and make him into the hero of this story... this parable?"

I think it was because of the man's ingenuity and drive. That was what He was extolling. The man didn't sit around whining over his situation. He got busy and found a solution. He came up with a plan and he followed the plan to fruition. He may have been a scoundrel, but at least he was an industrious scoundrel.

Jesus, you see, was a man of action and He wanted His followers to be people of action. And it saddened Him that so many of His followers were good people... nice folks, but it was a negative kind of goodness that really didn't do much to advance the Kingdom. You can almost see the sad expression on His face and in His eyes as He concludes this parable with this commentary:

"The children of this world are wiser than the children of light." (Luke 16: 8)

There was an interesting legal question posed in the papers recently. It seems that one lovely Sunday when the sermon was overlong, the congregation rushed, as usual, from its pews on the first syllable of "Amen" and the first sound of the organ postlude. But faithful Abigail, the only worshipper still held entranced by the sermon, moved slowly and bless her heart, she was trampled by all the good people in the church. She went on to sue the church and its officials for damages. Abigail argued,

"Those in charge of the church knew that most of the congregation stampedes after long and dreary sermons. They should have recognized the danger in the situation. Not being prepared to cope with it, they were negligent!"

The church's attorney made this response,

"A church is a non-profit organization manned for the most part by volunteers. No one has a right to expect it to be run with the smart efficiency of a business concern. Abigail, therefore, has no real claim."

Now, if you were the judge, asks the writer... would you award damages to Abigail?

What I found most interesting in this hypothetical situation was the characterization of the church. Hear it once again,
"A church is a non-profit organization manned for the most part by volunteers...and no one has a right to expect it to be run with the smart efficiency of a business...."

And, I ask you...."why not?" There are some very talented people in this fellowship just as there are in other churches. What if we were as good at what we do as McDonalds is at what they do, or Coca Cola, or even Microsoft? And what if we were as committed to spreading the "Good News" of God's Kingdom of light and love as American business is to winning new customers? This is the point that Jesus is trying to make. He wasn't happy with mediocrity. He wanted and want people who bear His name to not only be nice and caring people, but to be people who make a bit of a difference in the world.

Years ago, the great preacher Charles Spurgeon was commenting on a verse from the Book of Job that went something like this:

"And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, 'The oxen are plowing and the asses are feeding beside them!...."

"Yes...." said Spurgeon...lifting his eyes with a kindly glance around the crowded gallery...."That is still the case...some of us are plowing, breaking up the fallow ground and preparing the ground for good seed. And others are....well, they are just feeding." Then he looked his congregation in the eye and said,

"I know some of you dear, dear people...you would not miss a service if you could help it. Feeding, everlasting feeding. It is good to feed...it is necessary to feed, but do a bit of Gospel plowing as well....for the health of your souls and the glory of God. The oxen were plowing, but the asses were feeding!"

There's a message for each of us in Spurgeon's mischievous words. Our Lord, I'm sure, got frustrated by people who were nice, but who never did anything to advance the Kingdom...who just came and got fed. And please, don't misunderstand me. We're not talking here about some kind of heroic service. We're not talking about getting on a plane and heading off to Bosnia or some other place in the world where great problems exist. Sometimes the most meaningful acts of service can be the simplest....if those acts are given with love.

Let me close this out by telling you about a man by the name of Wilbur Pinney. Wilbur Pinney spent most of his career in the food industry and died several years short of retirement. Like all busy executives, he had a great many demands on his time outside of business...charitable groups, community projects, scouting and teaching a Sunday school class, but his first consideration always was his church. As a long-time member of the famous, downtown Chicago Temple, Wilbur performed an unheralded service. On Sunday afternoons, he participated in a social program for senior citizens who lived in the neighborhood. Many were widows and widowers...most were lonely, forgotten and neglected people. Wilbur didn't develop or administer the program...he merely met the Senior Citizens when they arrived and mingled with them and bid them farewell. On the Sunday after Wilbur died, the pastor of the Chicago Temple unlocked his study door and found a note that had been slipped under the door by an earlier visitor that read,
Wilbur Pinney undoubtedly was a nice man...but it wasn't niceness that made him smile. Pinney was committed to a ministry among the older members of that congregation. There were probably times when he didn't feel very much like smiling, but this was one thing he could do. He could help support his church by his ministry of caring.

As I look around this room...as I look out on this congregation, I have the feeling that everyone here in this sanctuary is a nice person, but I hope you will leave the church today asking yourself a question and this is it: what is MY ministry in this church? Am I doing a bit of plowing or am I just feeding? Y u know my guess is that Jesus used this scoundrel...this dishonest steward...to shock us and to bring us into greater awareness. Being nice is great. And being honest, I feel, is essential...but there's more to Christian discipleship that just being nice and being honest. There's a world out there that needs to be saved from the powers of death and darkness. And that world will only be saved if each disciple of Christ...yes, each church member...takes a bit of time to find a ministry somewhere....perhaps here....perhaps elsewhere...a ministry to others "in His name".

PRAYER Make us sensitive, once again, dear Lord...to Your spirit...to Your nearness and presence...here in this church this morning. Wrestle with us, in those deep and hidden corners of our lives where inertia, laziness, indifference, lack of purpose and commitment have taken hold. Stir us and get us moving once again...here in this Church, in this fellowship, as we shift gears now into another busy season. Make us willing to find the time to do something for Him. In His name we pray. Amen.
ANTHEM: "O For a Closer Walk"

"O for a closer walk with God, a calm and heav'nly frame; a light to shine upon the road that leads me to the Lamb! Return, O holy Dove, return! Return! Sweet messenger of rest. I hate the sins that made thee mourn, and drove Thee from my breast. So shall my walk be close to God, calm and serene my frame. So purer light shall mark the road that leads me to the Lamb!"

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New members are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in the downstairs Choir Room.

ANTHEM: "Sing Unto the Lord a New Song"

"Sing unto the Lord a new song, a new song! For He hath done marvelous things. Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth. Sing unto the Lord with the voice of a psalm. Let the sea roar and the fullness therein, the world, and they that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands, let the hills sing before the Lord. Sing unto the Lord for He hath done marvelous things."

HOMECOMING SUNDAY

Today we are celebrating our annual Homecoming Sunday service. It marks the official beginning of the Fall Season in our Church. We welcome all who have joined us this morning for this special service.

TODAY AT ONE

There will be an All-Church Fair "Kick-Off" Luncheon today at one o'clock in the rear of the downstairs Russell Room. All table captains and other interested persons and possible workers are urged to attend.

WEDNESDAY EVENING

Join Bill Bonwitt, our Assistant Minister, for a brief time of "prayer and praise" at six-thirty in the sanctuary.

A REMINDER OF SCHEDULED MEETINGS

The Administrative Council will meet on Thursday evening of this week at 7:30 in the Russell Room. The 1996 Budget Meeting of the Finance Committee will be Thursday, October the 5th. The Church Conference is scheduled for Sunday, October 15th, at one o'clock.

OCTOBER 21

Saturday, October 21st, is the date of the Fall Rummage Sale. Bring in your donation and sign up to lend a hand. Workers are needed for it, not only the day of the sale but also in the weeks leading up to it. Contact Dianne Keller at 876-2037 (evenings).
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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William Bonwitt ........................................... Assistant Minister
Lyndon Woodside ......................................... Organist-Choir Director
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Chairperson, Ushers ................................ Effie French
Superintendent, Sunday School .................... Tom DeBow
SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 24, 1995

ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A. M.

ORGAN
"Adagio in F Minor"
Mozart

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 674 "See the Morning Sun Ascending"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION
(Seated)
God of our life, we confess in company with one another and before You, that we are wayward and less than faithful servants. We have loved things and used people; remembered slights and forgotten kindesses; called on You in trouble and ignored You at other times; praises You in word and failed You in need; allowed the present age to mould us and left untapped the power of the age to come. Deal with us after Your mercy for we are sorry for our sins and earnestly seek Your pardon through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

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PSALTER Psalm 4 No. 741
AFFIRMATION OF FAITH No. 889
GLORIA PATRI No. 71

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ANTHEM "O For a Closer Walk" Stanford

PASTORAL PRAYER
PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM "Sing Unto the Lord A New Song" McAfee

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 453 "More Love To Thee, O Christ"
SERMON "Hero Or Scoundrel?" Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 670 "Go Forth For God"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN "Fantasia in C" Bach

*** Interval for Ushering"

LAY READER
We welcome Barbara Landon to the lectern today. Hailing from the Midwest, Barbara is a Marketing graduate from Michigan State University. Currently employed as a Research Analyst for Forbes Magazine, she is also pursuing studies in Alcoholism Counseling at The New School. Here in the church, Barbara is an usher and helps in the Saturday Feeding Program for the Homeless.

ALTAR FLOWERS
The flowers on the altar today are in celebration of the life of John J. Risley who passed away on October 5, 1985.

GREETERS AND USHERS
The greeters for today are Neil and Andrea Bardach. The ushers are T.A. McKinney, Pam and Mike Kipnis, Walter Spencer, Joyce Williams and Sam Wilson.

AN INVITATION
Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. All are invited to share in these moments of warm fellowship made possible for us today by Pat Henry, Bibi Banoo, Sara Haruyama, Josephine Keim and Vanessa Ramkissoon.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE
Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday mornings from ten-thirty to twelve. Nursery Care for infants and toddlers is available on the fourth floor.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS
The Adult Bible Class meets on Sunday morning at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. The class is studying the Gospel of Matthew. Bill Bonwitt is class leader.