

## **"Catching Sarcasm"**

**Sermon on Sunday, September 18, 2022**

**Based on Luke 16**

**Dear church,**

It can be difficult to catch a sarcastic comment in places and contexts where we don't expect it. We may even be blindsided when such a comment comes our way from a genuine, gentle soul. There are people in this church who would absolutely shock me with a sarcastic comment, and it would make me wonder, "What's going on?" Most people it wouldn't shock me, to be honest. We are not a congregation of strait-laced people. My point is: why would people who are not the sarcastic type decide to use sarcasm, one of the sharpest tools in the box of communication? It's usually for one simple reason: they can't get their message across otherwise; they aren't being heard; they are frustrated with you or me or someone. They say to themselves, "Let's take it up a notch and see how they react to a little pinch!" That's precisely what Jesus does in this parable.

Jesus is pinching the Pharisees here, the people who didn't get his message. He tried his best to explain the gospel to them by sharing the parable of the lost coin, by doubling down with the parable of the lost sheep, going overboard with the parable of the prodigal son who squandered his father's fortune, all straight-forward parables about God's unconditional love, about God seeking those who are lost and getting amazing joy out of a single person rescued from the shadow sides of life. All of this is recorded in the previous chapter, Luke 15. Apparently, they didn't get it. He was running into a wall of ignorance. When was the last time you talked to someone and felt you were talking to a wall? No movement! So frustrating! Now Jesus pulls out the sharp knife of sarcasm. Out of his hat of trick he presents: a gangster parable!

We must interpret this tall tale in the logic of Jesus' ongoing feud with the Pharisees. In the Pharisees' not so humble opinion our Lord was being dishonest with religion, overly generous with his customers, doling out forgiveness and grace like popcorn on a movie night, giving people second chances, giving them third chances, giving them a whole lot of chances, eating with them and drinking. The Pharisees think he is squandering away

centuries of sacred religious tradition. They don't like his management style, and they want to fire him. That's the context of the parable as I understand it.

Sometimes fundamentalist leaders, earnest Bible teachers, old-school Christians think that some of us pastors are too easy on our parishioners. "You are dishonest managers of religion," they say, using different words of course. "You don't talk enough about hell or repentance," they say. "You shirk the difficult topics and don't tell people the entire truth!" "Pastor, you should talk about abortion!" It's the same kind of criticism that Christ received for his brand of religion: a gospel full of love and compassion, which always asks for your sacrifice and your commitment by the way, but on the other hand is not judgmental. The gospel can be hard to accept for righteousness people. For them to get it, God may have to use a little – sarcasm.

So, for this story, Jesus accepts the judgments made by his adversaries. He makes fun of himself, saying, "Yes, I'm God's scoundrel manager! I'm God's gangster!" "I'm the guy who is irresponsible with religion and matters of faith. Yes, I give it away almost for free. Blame me!" The description he uses for the dishonest manager is not flattering at all. At one point in the parable the manager says, "What will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." Is Jesus having a little bit of fun here? I think so. And he is even working in the issue of money and power, a perennial source of corruption and a not-so-subtle stab at the Pharisees. They loved money, Luke tells us.

There is so much more to this confounding parable, and I don't claim that my interpretation is the one and only. But just for today, let us ponder what kind of God that is who is not afraid to make fun of himself. So much of fundamentalist religion is based on "You can't make fun of God. God forbid, you make fun of Jesus or Mohammed!" And this parable tells us that Christ has no qualms making fun of himself because it's not ultimately about him. The God in him is greater than his ego; he is secure in God... Let us also for moment ponder what it means when someone who is a serious and genuine person uses sarcasm.

Perhaps it should make us pause and think that this person has something to say that he or she has been desperately trying to get across. Perhaps we should pay attention. We know that, sadly, the Pharisees did not get it - not the serious version, not the sarcastic version, not any version of the gospel. Their hearts were sealed.

The gospel that Christ preached did not change with this parable. It was simple and straight forward: good news for all who are open to being found at the deepest level of their humanity, in the place where God and you intersect: in your soul. God wants to free your soul so that you can become the best version of you. And God will give you as many chances as necessary to get there. And, of course, nobody gets there permanently. Sometimes you are still the worst version of yourself. And that's alright too. You are still loved, and the dishonest manager alias Christ is still doing business with you. You will get another chance. You will still be treated the exact same way. Christ will always assume that you are worthy, and if necessary, he will cook the books for you. I'm not being sarcastic. It's the gospel. It's called love. One last word about this gangster parable. Maybe Jesus assumes here that some level of corruption is inevitable in an uneven world. And he says: if you must be corrupt, don't be corrupt with taking what is not yours but with giving. **Amen.**