

*Navigating with GPS*

Luke 16:1-13; Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1

A Pentecost 17 Sermon

Sunday, September 23, 2007

by Dr. Frank Trotter

A farmer stood leaning against a fence on the edge of his property when a man driving a fast car pulled over in a cloud of dust. “Do you know the way I can get to Route 91?” he called out the window. The farmer said, “Nope.” “Well, do you know where the nearest exit onto Interstate 210 is?” Again, the farmer said, “Nope.” “How about the town of Azusa? Do you know how to get there?” “Nope,” the farmer said. “I sure don’t.” The driver was very exasperated and said, “Well, you sure don’t know much, do you?” The farmer said, “Nope, but then again I’m not the one who’s lost.”

I recently saw an absolutely fascinating film entitled “Eastern Promises” that stars the Australian actor Viggo Mortensen. Vincent Cassel, a character actor, plays one of the supporting roles – the son of a Russian mafia crime lord. The character is boisterous, annoying, loving, abusive, scared and does some despicable things in this film. There is a moment near the end when everything is stripped away, all pretence is gone, all of his defenses are dropped and we see him for the absolutely terrified and fragile man that he is. We glimpse his soul in this one moment, and as I watched the scene I could imagine that he was thinking, “Where am I? How did I get here? What have I done with my life?”

How did I get here? What am I going to do now?

How did Bill Belichick, the celebrated coach of the New England Patriots, the man who has led his team to three Super Bowl wins in four years between 2001 and 2004, the coach who has often been described as a “genius,” find himself in a position where he authorized his coaching staff to break the rules of the NFL by using video equipment to steal the defensive signals of the New York Jets on September 9?

How did the authorities in a small town in Louisiana find themselves in the middle of an escalating controversy that resurrects all kinds of civil rights issues, issues of fairness and race, issues of arrogance when a white official threatened a group of African-American citizens by saying, “I can change your lives with the stroke of a pen?”

How did O. J. Simpson find himself in jail again?

Mike Huckabee, the former Governor of Arkansas and currently a candidate for the Republican nomination for the United States presidency, recently participated in a remarkably candid interview on National Public Radio in which he told the story of his race for the U. S. Senate in 1992 against Dale Bumpers, the popular Democratic incumbent. In deciding to run, Huckabee hired political consultants who persuaded him to attack Senator Bumpers for his support for the National Endowment for the Arts. But Huckabee went a step further at the urging of the consultants and suggested that Bumpers was therefore a supporter of pornography. Well, the voters in Arkansas didn't buy it and returned Senator Bumpers to the Senate by a wide margin. Huckabee now says that the experience taught him a lesson about following the advice of outside political consultants. [He says], 'You need to go with your own gut instincts and not let people around you push you into things, particularly if they're consultants, because when the campaign's over, they disappear.'"<sup>1</sup> By his own admission, Huckabee got himself into a losing proposition by not listening to his navigational instincts. He momentarily lost his bearings.

There are many things that can seduce us into setting aside our values, our innate sense of direction, our moral compasses. Power, prestige or status, a need to feel superior, competition... Perhaps nothing can make us lose our bearings as easily as can wealth. This past Friday Woody Hain took me to lunch at a local Chinese restaurant. Everything was fine until I opened my fortune cookie which read: "You will inherit a large sum of money." For several seconds, I lost track of the conversation around me.

One day Jesus tells a parable that has proven to be as difficult to understand as anything he ever said. A manager for a very wealthy man is charged with mishandling his boss' assets, so much so that a great deal of money has been lost. When the boss calls him in and asks for a full accounting, threatening him with the loss of his job, the man wonders, "How did I get here? What am I going to do? I'm not strong enough to get a job that requires physical labor. I'm too proud to beg my relatives or friends to provide for me."

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Allen, "First Race Teaches Huckabee to Trust His Instincts," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, Monday, September 17, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14419433>.

In an absolute panic, he begins to think, think, think of what to do. Finally, the idea comes: he summons his boss' debtors and tells them that their debt has been reduced substantially. At no time does he imply to the debtors that this act of generosity is his idea; in fact, his silence on the origin of the decision probably allows them to attribute the generosity to his boss. When the boss hears what he has done, he does what none of Jesus' hearers then or now expects. He commends the steward for his shrewdness. When Jesus finishes telling the parable, he adds additional comments of his own saying, "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

Several years ago, Lloyd Ogilvie, who was serving as Chaplain of the U. S. Senate at the time, wrote about a traveling companion he met on a cross-country flight. The man was one of America's most successful business men at the time and had risen from a very humble background to immense wealth. Ogilvie writes, "I asked him the secret of his success. His response was very interesting. 'Shrewdness!' was his one-word reply. I was shocked by his frankness. He went on to say that he spent every waking hour thinking, scheming, planning, developing and putting deals together. In it all he had tried to be completely honest in all his affairs! I couldn't help but admire his single-mindedness. He knew what he wanted and left nothing to chance. He worked hard to achieve his goals. All the power of his intellect, the strength of his seemingly limitless energies, the determination of his iron will and the resources of his calculated discernment of people were employed to accomplish his goal."<sup>2</sup> Later, Ogilvie mused what could happen if the people of God put the same sort of "shrewdness" to work for the kingdom of God.

And there's the problem. We don't have problems with thinking about faithful behavior as being compassionate, forgiving, or loving. But do we want to suggest that a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ is supposed to spend every waking hour thinking, scheming, shrewdly planning on God's behalf? It sounds more than a little distasteful to us, especially when Jesus seems to commend questionable ethical practices.

Bishop William Willimon agrees. He says, "For my money, this has to be the toughest of tough biblical texts..., the toughest parable Jesus ever told."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Autobiography of God* (Glendale, CA: G.L. Regal Books, 1979), 199.

<sup>3</sup> William Willimon, "The Future and What to Do About It," September 20, 1998, <http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=89>. Willimon, who was Dean of the

To demonstrate that any of us who have trouble understanding the parable are in good company, Willimon quotes St. Augustine who famously said, ‘I can’t believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord.’”<sup>4</sup>

History tells us that “the fourth-century Roman emperor Julian the Apostate and others cited this text in an attempt to discredit Christianity as a religion of scoundrels. Marxist interpreters have seen in this story a leitmotif for the proletariat struggle against the ruling capitalist class. The text has been called the enfant terrible of the Bible, a ‘notorious puzzle’ and an example of Jesus’ humor and sarcasm. One scholar describes the enormous literature on this text as a ‘jungle of explanations.’”<sup>5</sup>

But other scholars and theologians push back and ask us why we’re so upset. Theologian Frederick Buechner argues that “a parable is a small story with a large point. Most of the ones Jesus told have a kind of sad fun about them. The parables of the Crooked Judge (Luke 18:1-8), the Sleepy Friend (Luke 11:5-8), and the Distracted Father (Luke 11:11-13) are really jokes in their way, at least part of whose point seems to be that a silly question deserves a silly answer. In the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the elder brother’s pious pique when the returning prodigal gets the red-carpet treatment is worthy of Moliere’s Tartuffe, as is the outraged legalism of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) when Johnny-Come-Lately gets as big a slice of the worm as the Early Bird.”<sup>6</sup> Buechner says that “the point of the Unjust Steward is that it’s better to be a resourceful rascal than a saintly schlemiel (Luke 16:1-8).”<sup>7</sup>

Another scholar suggests that the steward’s resourcefulness succeeds on several fronts simultaneously. His boss is “praised in the minds of his debtors for his apparent generosity; second, the worldly lot of his neighbors has been improved; and third, the steward has provided for his own future economic security, i.e., his salvation! In his own way, however deceitful or

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Chapel at Duke University when this sermon was preached, is now Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Commentary on Luke 16:1-13, “Homiletics Online,”

[http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/commentary\\_display.asp?installment\\_id=2970&item\\_id=25494](http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/commentary_display.asp?installment_id=2970&item_id=25494).

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 66-67.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

ingenious, the dishonest steward has achieved aims which characterize love of God, love of neighbor and love of self.”<sup>8</sup>

Theologian Alan Culpepper, who is Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, points out that we shouldn’t be put off by the parable’s “characteristic unexpected twist.”<sup>9</sup> After all, many of the parables end up in a different place than what the crowd expects.

The point seems to be that if the steward is suddenly in the midst of one of these “How did I get here moments?,” there will come many times when we will find ourselves in one, too. If the steward’s natural instincts – his navigational system – had let him down, we know what that feels like, too. The moral compass gets unplugged just as we hear that a pop quiz in our Morality 101 Class has been scheduled for 5 minutes from now. Will a sense of urgency, a big adrenaline rush, kick in as it did for the steward? Will we wake up in time to come up with a plausible scenario to explain how we got there – better yet, to come up with a clever or shrewd course of action to get us out of there?

Culpepper says, “Through the parable, therefore, Jesus admonishes his hearers to cast caution aside, seize the moment of opportunity, and make provisions for their future before God. The kingdom is at hand...[and] one who hears the gospel knows that just such a decisive act is required of those who will stake their all on the coming kingdom of God.”<sup>10</sup>

This past February *The Wall Street Journal* reported that a father came to the uncomfortable discovery that his 20-year-old daughter had been investigating his earnings, including his many investments. When he asked her for an explanation, she said, “It’s just what people my age do. We Google our parents.”<sup>11</sup>

Well, think about it for a moment. “Think about a kid who Googled his parents’ wealth. We can imagine his mother saying to him, ‘Well, son, you’ve gotten into areas that are none of your business, and you are way off base if you are assuming you are entitled to something you didn’t earn. But

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 309. Dr. Culpepper is Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>11</sup> Frank, Robert, “Googling Dad’s Assets,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2007, W2.

you've shown commendable initiative, so together we're going to look for some ways to put that initiative to constructive purposes.' We can assume from the parable that there's every reason to use our best and strongest abilities, including our initiative, for kingdom purposes."<sup>12</sup>

That's not too different from a whole series of decisions that have been issued by judges who are trying to figure out what to do with this entire new generation of incredibly bright young men and women who are figuring out how to hack into the most guarded bastions of data and information through their computer skills. The sentences are often shaped in ways that require the offenders to use their skills for a higher good.

Jim Wallis, an evangelical pastor, activist, and founder of the *Sojourners* magazine, describes how "inner-city gangs ruthlessly defend their 'turf,' how drug lords mark off a neighborhood and make it theirs. 'I want churches to learn from these guys,' he [says]. 'I want some inner-city churches who will say, 'This is our turf and we control this neighborhood of the six blocks around our church and we are going to do what's necessary to make sure you don't trample our turf.' He [tells] a story of one inner-city church which posted some of their little old ladies on each corner in foldout lawn chairs, armed with video cameras and how overnight they changed an entire Detroit neighborhood. They had no idea of how to work the cameras, but the drugdealers didn't know it. Those old ladies were not simply savvy to the ways of the world, beating the world at its own game, rather than had a conviction about the real nature of the world, the true course of the future and they acted accordingly."<sup>13</sup>

These stories of possibility have made me dream of what might happen here if we challenged all of our members to use their best gifts for God instead of just their own welfare or self-interest. What might happen here on Colorado Boulevard if we were to become as shrewd for God's sake as the world is shrewd for its own sake? But how does the church instill that kind shrewdness? If we need a new navigational system for our membership, where does it come from? How do you teach this kind of radical decisiveness that Jesus is commending to us?

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<sup>12</sup> From "Smooth Operator," a sermon on Luke 16:1-13 at Homiletics Online, [http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl\\_display.asp?installment\\_id=93040335](http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040335).

<sup>13</sup> Willimon.

When I got my new Toyota Prius, I was delighted to make use of its GPS or global positioning system. I'm sure all of you have some understanding that this amazing new technology utilizes a "constellation of at least 24 medium Earth orbit satellites that transmit precise microwave signals...[enabling] a GPS receiver to determine its location, speed/direction, and time. It's now widely used for map-making, land surveying, commerce, and scientific use."<sup>14</sup>

The problem I find in using it, however, is that it tends to make me rely on the comforting voice that comes out of the console telling me exactly which direction I should be taking. I've found that I'm occasionally even unaware of the names of the roads I'm crossing or traveling on because I'm just waiting for the voice that says, "Make the next right turn." Some have suggested that what GPS is doing is making us directionally lazy, of relying so much on technology that we wouldn't be able to navigate very effectively without it.

What Jesus is suggesting in today's difficult and challenging parable is one where our intellect, our rationality, our shrewdness are much more involved than being on just some kind of fancy automatic pilot.

Bishop Willimon says, "The Bible says that the future is God's. Therefore we are to live as those constantly open to God's advent among us, watchful, ready to move. We are not to be anxious about our lives, timid over tomorrow, paralyzed by anxiety. Worrying about the future gets us nowhere. Rather, we must trust that the future is God's... Jesus lures toward an unexpected future, unexpected because it is not our future; it is God's."<sup>15</sup>

When I read that quote, I suddenly thought of a different meaning for GPS. Instead of "global positioning system," might it be possible that we think far more intentionally on "God's positioning system"?

Jesus urges us to use all of our natural resources, especially our wealth where we often place the greatest emphasis, for the sake of the kingdom of God. In Willimon's words, we are urged to "stride into the future with confidence, not confidence in ourselves or our abilities, but confidence in the power and grace of God. The one who told the story is Jesus, the one who not only told good stories, but boldly embodied them. Even when he moved

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<sup>14</sup> Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global\\_Positioning\\_System](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Positioning_System).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

toward a cross, he did not do so as one resigned to a bleak fate, but as one confident that the future belongs to God. He bet his life on that and, in Easter, his risk was vindicated. Knowing that, we are able to move into the future with confidence, with shrewd recourses not of our own devising. This is good news.”<sup>16</sup>

In George Bernard Shaw’s *St. Joan*, his well-known rendering of the story of Joan of Arc, Robert Beaudricourt, the skeptical Inquisitor, urges her to reveal the nature of the divine instructions she claims to have received:

Joan: “...You must not talk to me about my voices.”

Robert: “How do you mean? Voices?”

Joan: “I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.”

Robert: “They come from your imagination...” [he says dismissively]

Joan: “Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.”<sup>17</sup>

Listening to God’s positioning system always keeps us on the right track. For, “the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters; he restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>16</sup> Willimon.

<sup>17</sup> George Bernard Shaw, “St. Joan,” Act II, Scene 1.