

Let's Make A Deal

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, September 19, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Let us pray. Gracious God, we do thank you for the high privilege of worshipping and praising your holy name. We thank you for this sanctuary, this place set apart from the busyness of the world and the business of our own lives that we might come together as a community and hear you speak to us. And so we pray that through this service – through the hymns, the prayers, through the silence and the readings and the anthems, the preaching and all that we do together as a church, even the prayers that you would speak to us and that your word would fall upon our hearts so that we might truly live as your children in this world.

Amen.

Sermon:

Well, I cannot believe I am actually starting a sermon and including in a sermon something about the Yankees. I know that brings a smile to Carl's face and to Carolyn's face. Not to my wife's face. But did you see it this week? Did you see it? You saw it; I know you saw it, Carl. That cheater Derek Jeter, he's up there in the batter's box and the pitch comes in a little too close and he sort of steps back and he quick - soon as that ball is knocked off - he quick runs out of the batters box. "Oh, oh, oh," and the umpire says, "Take your base. You're hit by the ball."

And then the slow motion playback comes and we see Derek Jeter in that batters box backing up just enough, getting his hand off the bat just in time so the ball hits the end of the bat and bounces away. In fact, it was a hit. [Loud sound.] And if – Derek's getting me, I know he's here. If Mr. Jeter had said to the umpire, "No, no, no, it didn't hit me." He would've been called out. But he faked that so well, he sold it and he got first base. And wouldn't you know, next batter comes up,

hits a homerun and Derek Jeter gets to score. Oh, those Yankees. Not only do they buy the pennant, they cheat for it.

The clincher for me, in all of this, the clincher for me came when one of these sports reporters/broadcasters claims to have spoken with Mr. Jeter after the game and I didn't hear Derek say this so I can't attribute it, but he attributed it that Derek was quoted as saying something like, "What ever it takes to win." You know what? I think Derek has just done his team in for the rest of the year because you know those umpires are going to be scrutinizing anything, and if there's any question you know where that call is going to go, Carl. I know you're shaking your head, but you know where that umpire – if it's on the bubble. I don't know, Derek might have just done himself and his teammates in. We'll see; we'll see what happens; proofs in the pudding.

Well, we all make deals along life's way, don't we? Don't sit there and shake your head you don't. Some of us make deals with the devil, sometimes not even realizing we are doing so - telling a little or, so called, white lie to someone. It may be cheating on our income tax (I didn't mean to look at you, Abraham. I'm sorry. I'll look away for the next one I'm saying.) or cheating on your spouse. We may make a deal to rob Peter in order to pay Paul; isn't that what Bernie Madoff did? Ooo, that hurts; that hurts.

Others make deals with God. Lord, just let me pass this test and I promise I will study harder. God, help me through this illness and I promise I will be more faithful to you. We have often heard about those who upon returning from war and from battle saying, "You know there really are no Atheists in fox holes." Right, Carl?

I actually knew a man who entered the ordained ministry of the Methodist Church as a result of surviving battle in Korea. He shared with me that one lonely night, while mortars were being fired at him and the men who were with him, he had prayed to God saying, "Lord, if I survive this attack I promise to serve your church for the rest of my life." And he did; and

he did so faithfully. Yes, I believe that we all at some point along the way of life say to God or to the devil, "Let's make a deal."

The parable told by Jesus in our Gospel reading today is at best problematic but when you really start to look at this parable and the instruction that follows it seems that Jesus is condoning unethical and possibly immoral behavior. As a side note, when I was studying for my doctor of ministry degree at Drew, I was taking a preaching course, an advanced preaching course and the professor teaching the course assigned me to preach on this parable. And I didn't sleep for nights trying to figure this thing out; and I still don't have it figured out.

"A rich man had a manager," as the story goes, "Who was found to be squandering the rich man's property." This manager was a man who made his living with his brain and not with his brawn, not with his strength. He was what we would call a white-collar worker and not a laborer. The rich man in this story called the manager in to his office to give an account of the books he was keeping. And on the way to what he knew was going to be the end of his career, the manager devises a plan to provide for himself and probably for his family when he was no longer employed.

Now let's face it; if any of us were in his shoes I think we might've done the same thing. Looking ahead, seeing that you're going to lose a job puts you in a pretty desperate situation. And desperate people tend do desperate things. And this man is no exception to that. I cannot imagine what it must feel like to be called into the boss's office knowing that you are about to be fired. I can't imagine that. And you maybe somebody who lived through that nightmare and you know where this man is coming from.

Where will my family live? How will I feed the children? How will I provide for the needs of my family? Any one of us would be scared out of our wits if we were in this man's shoes. On top of it; maybe underneath it or behind

it; maybe at the center of it; would be the feelings of guilt and shame for having been caught in doing something that was dishonest. The boss knows that I have cheated him out of his due. I have tarnished my reputation and the boss is mad at me because he knows that I've squandered his property and because I represent the boss whenever I'm doing these deals with people, I've tarnished my boss' reputation. I've done harm not only to myself and my family, but to the boss and his family and his business.

This manager in Jesus' parable is a quick and very creative thinker who made his living with his brain not with his strength or his brawn. On his way to be fired he ingratiates himself with two people who are in debt to his boss. He invites each one to create a new bill stating that they owe the rich man much less than what they really do owe. These two are probably not aware of the situation at hand and do not know that the manager is about to lose his job. All they know is that the manager represents the rich man in all of these matters. So, when the manager has these two people create these two new bills it appears that either the rich man has decided to be generous to those who owe him or that the manager is lowering his commission on their accounts as an act of generosity to them. Whichever is the case, the manager and the rich man come out looking very good to these two clients who are in debt to the rich man.

When the rich man learns about what the manager has done he realizes that this manager is very shrewd. If the manager is not fired then the rich man has the reputation of being a generous man who deals generously with his clients and their ability to pay back what is owed. If the manager is fired - if the rich man follows through and actually fires this man - then the manager has secured clients for himself taking them away from the rich man's business and is perceived as one who is generous as opposed to the rich man who is exacting in his accounts. You know, we never know the end of the story. Jesus never finishes the story and we never

find out what happens when the manager walks into the rich man's office and is called to task.

Out of all of this arises the question, do the means justify the end? Or, as Jesus is quoted as saying, is it okay to make friends for ourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that we can secure a place for ourselves in God's heaven? Is it okay that Derek Jeter cheated his way on base or should he have looked at the umpire and said that it was an act, I was pretending - the ball really didn't hit me? On a larger scale, is it okay that Bernie Madoff cheated thousands of unsuspecting investors out of billions of dollars? As a side note we must realize that Bernie Madoff started his Ponzi scheme with one person or maybe a very small group of people who trusted him and it grew from there; a small deception that led to the greatest scam known to Wall Street. Oh, if I just tell a small lie it'll be ok; nobody will be hurt. And then we build our house of cards with lie, after lie, after lie until the cards come tumbling down.

What is Jesus talking about in this parable? Is it okay to be dishonest or shrewd with material things to secure a place for ourselves in God's heavenly kingdom? Are lying and cheating and shrewdness qualities of a disciple of Jesus? Is it our goal to get to heaven whatever the cost and whoever we have to step on in order that we get there?

I have to say my answer to those questions is no. I don't believe that Jesus is saying to be my disciple you've got to be a cheat; you've got to be shrewd; you've got to work some deals in the side room. You've got to do unto others before they do unto you.

So we have to ask ourselves, who was Jesus talking to in this parable? Who was Jesus accused of accompanying in his ministry? The Pharisees did not like the fact that Jesus kept company with the liars and the cheats of society. He was telling this parable to people who knew exactly what was going on in the story. They were living it. The cheats and the liars that surrounded Jesus had all made friends with each other. They knew better than

anyone else that if they were to have a place in God's heaven it would not be due to their shrewdness and cunning. They knew, better than the Pharisees, their only chance at heaven rested with the one who could secure a place for them.

And so you've got to believe that these people were trying to make deals with Jesus because they knew he was their only hope. And you can hear the voices as he's traveling around Palestine in 1st century. "Jesus, if I do this for you, would you do this for me?" "Jesus, if I wash your feet with this precious oil and my hair, will you open the door to heaven for me?" "Jesus, if I give back to all of those people that I cheated as a tax collector and if I restore not only what they had but if I do it fourfold, is there a place for me up there, Jesus?" The liars and cheats and scoundrels were trying to work their deals in the back room with or savior. Because they understood Jesus was their only hope.

In the end, when you look at your life and you see all of the deals that you've made with the devil and with God, you realize that there is no deal you can make to secure your place in God's heaven. In fact, I would dare to say the deal has already been made. And the question is do we believe it? The greatest scheme of all time has already gone down. Jesus is our ticket into heaven. And there is no deal that we can work with God or with Jesus or with the devil that will change that. All it takes is coming clean, accepting the new life that God offers to each one, and believing in our Savior that he is the deal, the real deal. Let's make a deal? I don't think so; the deal's already been made.

All praise, all thanks to God; and to God be the glory. Amen.