

"Accounts Receivable"

Brer Rabbit was the central figure of the Uncle Remus stories that were derived from African-American folktales. Brer Rabbit was the consummate trickster and a master at turning circumstances to his own advantage.

One day, Brer Fox planted a patch of goober peas. He raked and hoed a fine piece of ground, planted the peas, and soon they were ready for picking. Brer Rabbit had watched Brer Fox plant the peas, and told his children and the Mrs. where to find them. The rabbits gorged themselves on Fox's goobers, and when he went to check his patch there were barely any peas left.

Brer Fox was a mad as could be. He suspected Brer Rabbit was to blame, but he had covered his tracks and the Fox couldn't find him. So the Fox found a place in the fence where the rabbit could get through, and he set a snare. He tied a rope to a hickory sapling, bent it double and at the other end of the rope he made a loop. The next morning Brer Rabbit slipped through the fence, and before he knew it, the trigger snapped and he was swinging from the tree. He couldn't climb up and he couldn't get down. He just hung there, swinging back and forth, thinking up an explanation or two for Brer Fox of how he got into such a pickle.

While he was thinking he heard someone stumbling down the road. It was Brer Bear looking for a bee-tree so he could get some honey. When he saw him he called out, "Howdy there Bear." Brer Bear looked up and saw Brer Rabbit swinging from the tree. "Howdy Brer Rabbit. How are you this morning?" "Middling, Brer Bear," Rabbit replied. "*Just middling.*" Bear asked, "Why are you up the tree?" "I'm earning a dollar a minute from Brer Fox. I'm keeping the crows away from his goober

patch. He will pay a dollar a minute for whomever acts like a scarecrow for him.”

Brer Bear had a big family to feed and he needed money. “Would you like to have the job?” Brer Rabbit asked. “Sure!” he replied. The rabbit told the bear how to get him down. When he was freed, Brer Bear slipped into the snare and he was in the air, swinging back and forth and growling at the birds to keep them away.

Brer Rabbit laughed to himself as he went down the road to Brer Fox’s place to tell him that the goober thief was caught in the hickory tree. Brer Fox grabbed a stick, ran to the patch and saw Brer Bear. He yelled at the bear and called him a goober thief.

Well, Brer Rabbit knew the Bear would be mad when he discovered he had been tricked. He hopped down the road and hid in the mud beside a pond. Only his eyes were sticking out so he looked like a big bullfrog. Brer Bear bumped down the road, fuming mad. “Howdy, Brer Bullfrog,” he said. “Have you seen Brer Rabbit anywhere?” “He just ran down the road,” he said in a deep, croaking bullfrog voice. The Bear thanked him and went fuming down the road.

When he was out of sight, Brer Rabbit wriggled out of the mud, washed himself off in the pond and ran home, laughing at how he had escaped Brer Fox and Brer Bear and thinking up a new way to get into Brer Fox’s goober patch.

Is this the sort of story to tell children? I don’t think so. It’s riddled with stealing, lying, deception, dishonesty, and getting a laugh at the expense of others. Brer Rabbit has no conscience, his ethics aren’t challenged, and by the end of the story he hatches another plot to steal more goober peas. There’s no moral high ground in this story.

But if you think the story of Brer Rabbit is suspect, consider Jesus’ parable of the dishonest steward. An anonymous company snitch told the boss that one of his managers was wasting the company’s money. The manager is called into the

boss's office where he gets a tongue-lashing and a pink slip. But before being shown the door the boss says, "I want to see the spreadsheets on all your accounts, then I never want to see your face again."

The manager's cogs turned like Brer Rabbit's. "I've never worked enough to break a sweat in my life," he said to himself. "I'm not going to start now." He called all of his clients who owed the company money. He still had a company credit card, so he wined and dined the clients at an elegant club. Pick anything on the menu. Order two lobsters if you want."

As they enjoyed themselves, the manager asked, "Exactly how much do you owe the company?" One client said, "\$100 million." "Tell you what," the manager said, "Let's say you owe \$50 million and we'll call it even." Another client said, "I owe \$75 million." "Are you *sure* it's that much?" the manager asked. "If memory serves me correctly, it's \$40 million. Isn't that how you remember it?" "Uhhhhh... yeah! That's how I remember it!"

We think we know what he will say about the sleazy manager. We expect Jesus to condemn his crooked behavior. But not only does he not condemn it, he commends it. This is the most troubling parable Jesus' told. Luke was uneasy with the parable, too, because he added other sayings of Jesus to it like, "Whoever is faithful in little is faithful in much," but it doesn't connect with the parable. Jesus said, "The master commended the manager because he acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light." We wish he hadn't said it, but he did.

There is obviously more going on here than a superficial reading will reveal, so before we jump in the deep end let's make some observations. First, throughout Luke's gospel there is a concern with possessions and how we use them. We can hoard them, withhold them, or share them. Luke tells us that generosity was the distinguishing trait of the first church. Believers held all things in common. They shared their wealth and possessions with each other and no one was in need.

Second, money wasn't a taboo topic. They learned that money was a good servant but a poor master. They understood that money was a power for good and for God. They weren't timid about challenging each other in money matters. Go to the book of Acts and read the story of Ananias and Sapphira and you'll see what I mean.

People who aren't part of the church have told me, in no uncertain terms, "All churches cares about is people's money." I tell them-- in no uncertain terms, "That's not true! We're not just after your money. We want everything you've got. It's your life we're after." I tell them we talk about money because Jesus addressed it and our relationship to it more than another other issue—more than prayer, more than belief, faith, salvation, and going to heaven.

Third, a Christian is a steward. Steward comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which translates "house." Stewards tend to household matters—keeping things up and running, Mowing the lawn, cleaning house, caring for the dog, managing money, paying the mortgage. A related word is *oicology* from which we get, *ecology* that means, "to care for the earth." Stewards care for things that don't belong to them, but have been entrusted to them by God—relationships, home, church, the environment. The day will come when all of us must give an account to God of how we cared for or didn't care for these things. *The boss will judge us according to how we used or abused the accounts given us.*

Now, back to the parable. Why was the boss so pleased with the crooked manager he had just fired? The answer is linked to what money is supposed to do. I'm packing my apartment to move into a new home on Wednesday. I found an unopened a box of my mother's things, and inside was a zippered moneybag from where my parents did their banking. Inside I found insurance papers, my grandfather's wallet, an envelope, and a jar. In the envelope were twenty, two-dollar bills. In the jar were forty Kennedy half dollars. My Dad had collected the bills and coins, put them into a pouch, stuck it all in a drawer and forgot about it. The money is worth no more today than when he zipped it up

some thirty years ago. It earned no interest. It purchased nothing. All it did was take up space in a dark closet.

Its been suggested that Jesus praised the dishonest manager because he kept the money moving. Money is worthless unless it is given away or spent. Instead of keeping the boss's money tied up, he used it to erase his client's debt and give back some of his boss's investment. The money wasn't his, but he exercised generosity to give his clients a new start.

Jesus didn't say how the manager had squandered his boss's investments. But when it came time to show his accounts, he did what he had perhaps never done before—he forgot about money for himself. He moved it around and made an investment which earned the bosses admiration, his new friend's appreciation, and assured him a place of habitation.

Lessons can be learned from any person or situation. People who are shrewd and savvy in the ways of the world have things to teach people trying to live according to the ways of God's kingdom. I met a Presbyterian pastor who lamented to his barber that he couldn't find anyone to take on a leadership position in his church. The barber asked what he needed, and as the pastor described the qualities of the person he was looking for, his barber said, "I can do that." When do I start?" Not long afterward the new ministry was going great. The pastor asked the barber where he developed such organizational skills. He replied, "Well, in my previous life, before I became a Christian, I operated the largest drug smuggling network on the east coast."

Jesus said, "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light." If the boss told us to clean out our desks, most of us would put our tails between our legs, wring our hands, lose sleep worrying about the future and sign up for unemployment benefits. Our confidence shrivels. We grow timid. We circle the wagons and wave the white flag. And Jesus says, "Oh ye of little faith. Look to the guy called to give an account of his stewardship." This shrewd little dude said, "I got myself into this pickle. I can get myself out." His view of the future wasn't fixed or final. He was

confident, resourceful, and resilient, which is what disciples of Jesus must be.

C. S. Lewis said, “The problem isn’t that our desires are too strong, but too weak. We are far too easily pleased.”

I urge us all, as we prepare for today’s council meeting, to go into it with open minds and hearts. No fretting. No language of scarcity. No defeatism. No, “We can’t.” The primary tender with which we do business is not dollars, but spiritual energy and God gives it in abundance.

When called to give an account of our stewardship, will it show that we sought the energy? Will it show that we kept it moving? Will it show that we stepped forward in trust, or shiveled in fear?