

- 1) I once had a preaching student who came to seminary with a background as an actor.
He could read the phone book in a way that made you weep.
He had not so much a flair for the dramatic, as a deep feel for drama—
what it takes to make a story work.
After seminary he became the rector of a rather buttoned down parish in Southern Virginia.
Preparing for a sermon on one of Jesus's parables,
he realized that if he wanted his parishioners to really hear
what the parable's first hearers had heard,
he would have to tell his congregation a similar story.
Not just dress up the characters "then and there" in clothes of "here and how"—too obvious.
But—with a different setting, different characters, and different plot—
he'd have to shape a story that took his listeners on a journey parallel to that of the parable;
ending up in the kind of unexpected place where Jesus initially led his listeners.
He created such a story.
In place of a sermon, he just told the story—and sat down.
Looking up, his eyes met a solid wall of deer-in-the-headlights stares.
At the end of the service, he shook one limp hands after another—*Morning. Morning.*
Then up came a woman who locked his eye with a piercing glint.
You PREACHED us a parable! she said.
Yes I did! he replied, hope rising in his heart.
You're not supposed to PREACH parables, she snapped. You're supposed to EXPLAIN them.
- 2) I have some sympathy for the woman, don't you?
What's the point of a story if it leaves its listeners at a total loss?
If we see no connection to our own life stories, a story like that seems unintelligible.
What's THAT supposed to that MEAN?—EXPLAIN it!
Suspense, intrigue, conflict—even surprise—all these we like in stories.
But when we're dropkicked into a world we don't even recognize, that's . . . disorienting.
Which is probably why Jesus tells so many tales with a twist.
Because if the only stories we ever hear are ones that merely reinforce our recognitions;
we might get stuck in those stories, and never envision the possibility of any other worlds.
- 3) Today, Luke's Jesus is on a story-telling roll—tossing out one twisted tale after another.
He's just driven scribes and Pharisees bonkers with back-to-back brain-benders
about one lost sheep, ten lost coins, and two lost sons.
All three tales are about styles of resource management curious at best—
stories of high risk investment strategies employed for limited or tenuous gain.
But . . . you just can't manage a sheep herd, a household economy, or a family farm
in the way that the sheep-seeking shepherd, the house-sweeping woman,
and the longsuffering father do in these twisted tales that Jesus tells.

If you did, your bottom line would flat line; your business would go belly up.

The moral order of your world would come unhinged.

Hearing these stories about a lost sheep, lost coin, and lost sons—

listeners react with incredulous stares, wondering: *What kind of world is THAT?*

Good question! I hear Jesus murmur. *What kind of world INDEED?*

4) But now Jesus turns to address his disciples;

And he serves them up another resource management story—this one far stranger still.

It's three separate stories, actually, each one crashing in on the other two.

Stories of a big-shot land owner, a harried property manager, and hostile tenant farmers.

All parties are locked in a deadly economic dance of cut throat co-dependence.

All are protecting their own risky interests as best they can—

by doing all they can to put the interests of everybody else at even greater risk.

- The land owner — he owns all the farms and has the big bucks.

Everyone is under his thumb—he can fire the manager or run out the farmers at will.

BUT he needs the crops the farmers grow, and the collections the manager makes.

He has, after all, a life style to fund—other big shots to impress.

- The manager — he drives hard bargains with the farmers for the owner.

Rental contracts that demand enough to satisfy the owner,

but not so much as to incite rebellion among the farmers.

(That would have negative implications for the owner's bank balance.)

Charging interest is technically illegal,

so—as nobody ever says—but everyone always does—

the manager folds the interest into the contract as a hidden cost.

He also collects under-the-table payments from the farmers

in exchange for not writing the contract with hidden fees that are even higher.

- The farmers—they may well have once owned the land;

but in hard times passed, faced the harsh options of sell out or starve.

Now they pay dearly for the privilege of working land that once was theirs.

They are vulnerable to the weather, the market, the greed of owner and manager.

So why stay and work? They have families to feed.

But they employ every passive-aggressive system-sabbotaging strategy they can—

Anything to make the manager look bad.

Anything to put a dent in the land owner's profits or his pride.

This is, you see, as we have said, is not a single story in which everyone has a share;

It's a trilogy of simultaneous silo stories—

Everyone's story a serious threat to the stories of everyone else.

Everyone holding everyone else in perpetual suspicion.

Everyone on the lookout for any chance to stab everyone else in the back.

Everyone trying to get away with as much dishonesty as possible—

Hey—It's an absolutely necessary survival skill.

17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes the situation perfectly—

This is a *state of nature*—*a war of all against all*, where life is *solitary, nasty, brutish, and short*.

And it's about to get even more so for the property manager.
The farmers plant anonymous rumors intended for the owner's ears—
rumors that the manager has not shaken them down with sufficient efficiency.
(The irony in that innuendo is amazing!)

5) Thus far, however, this tale by Jesus has no twist.

It's a story with which all who hear it are all too familiar.

When the manager obsesses about being too weak to dig, too proud to beg;
he's putting the situation mildly.

The owner has dismissed him based on insinuations unsubstantiated by evidence—
no defense allowed, no appeal permitted.

For the manager, this dismissal is a death sentence.

Once word gets out, who will hire him?

Manual labor will be his option of last resort.

But can he dig with hands that, all his life, have only hefted pencils? NO WAY!

Unable to keep pace, he'll lose whatever digging job he finds.

Then he'll have no money for food, and thus no strength for ANY digging ever.

When he gets fired, and tries to panhandle from those he's just been squeezing,
you think they'll say: *SURE! GLAD TO HELP! ?*

Dream On! This manager is a dead man walking.

6) But now the standard story world that Jesus is unfolding sudden dis-integrates.

Desperate, the manager devises a way to serve his own interest

by subverting the whole economic system—to everyone's economic advantage.

Before word gets out that he's manager no longer, he cuts deals with the farmers,
reducing their rents to rates they can afford.

WAIT! That story doesn't work! It's unrecognizable in any world we know.

WAIT! Maybe that's the only way the story can work!

Because it is unrecognizable in the worlds we know.

This easily recognizable story of dog-eat-dog breaks apart
into a most peculiar story of allies aiding allies.

Consider:

These farmers are far better off, and they owe the manager a favor.

This owner now looks generous in the eyes of the farmers.

(And he'd get a black eye if he tried to re-impose the terms of the original contract.)

Whoever the manager may be, rent collection will be far easier the next time around.

This manager has now strategically positioned himself either to be rehired,
or to find a home with another land owner—

and while he's job hunting, he can collect on his IOU's from the grateful farmers.

No wonder the landowner commends the manager for his shrewdness!

Necessity is the mother of invention, and the manager has invented a business model
that takes a zero-sum-game economy and turns it on its head.

This has become a totally different story, one that challenges the standard story line of
My story or your story—only one can win.

Into the very center of these competing cutthroat co-dependent *state of nature* stories—

This *war of all against all—solitary, nasty, brutish, and short—*

Into a world that we all recognize well

Jesus interjects a story with a twist toward communal interdependence.

Does it need an explanation? Try this:

If, in a world

where ill-gotten wealth is so often a weapon,

where the economic system itself can so often be an engine of oppression,

where self-serving silo stories so often consign us to competitive co-dependence—

IF all these apparently intractable odds can be upset by a single, subversive story of sharing—

THEN what might a really radically story sound like—

a story about serving a totally different kind of Master?

What, in other words, what might doing business look like in the Commonwealth of God?

Good Question! Says Jesus—What INDEED? Imagine THAT!