

Monopoly Money
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Luke 16:1-13

I grew up with five brothers in an old white farmhouse on a hill in West Virginia with no indoor plumbing, no running water, and no TV. The nearest city was 25 miles away, on the other side of Lens Creek Mountain, so even on a Saturday night there was really nowhere to go and nothing to do. But it wasn't all that bad. Because we weren't in a hurry to go anywhere we lingered over supper, talked and told stories, and sometimes, when the mood was just right my dad would get a twinkle in his eye, look around the table, and ask, "Who are we going to make cry tonight?" That was his way of asking us if we wanted to play a game of Monopoly, and almost always, we did.

We would jump up and clear the table, scrape the dishes, and stack them in the sink. Mom would start making popcorn while Dad got the Monopoly game down off the shelf in the hall closet. Sometimes my brothers and I would go upstairs and put on old felt hats and neckties so that we looked like riverboat gamblers sitting around the table, smoking imaginary cigars.

We took our Monopoly seriously, and we learned it from my dad. He had memorized the price of every property on the board, and knew what the rent was with three houses or a hotel. He never counted the spaces when he moved his playing piece. He would see where he wanted to land and then he would say something like, "I need a five. I can see it already: a three and a two!" or "Seven come eleven, baby needs a new pair of shoes!" and then he would roll and whatever number came up that's where he would move his piece in one clean jump. He kept his money in his shirt pocket, and if he hit your property and owed you money he would pull out that wad and count off a few

bills, throw them down with a snort, and then stick it all back in his shirt pocket and hand the dice to the next player.

He liked to keep things moving. We never used the one dollar bills; we would just round up to the nearest five. We never did that silly thing where you put all your fines and fees in the middle of the board and then someone wins the whole pot when they hit “Free Parking.” And we would always wait until every piece of property had been sold and then go into this wild frenzy of trading, each of us ending up with a few choice monopolies, ready to get down to the real strategy of the game. We played to win. We took no prisoners. But sometimes we got so caught up in the game that the line between Monopoly and Reality began to blur.

You could see it happen. Near the end of the game my younger brother Greg—the only real athlete in the family and always a fierce competitor—would move his piece around the board and gulp when it landed on Boardwalk—Dad’s property—decorated with a big, red hotel and a hefty \$2,000 rental fee. Greg would look down at the money in his hand, look at the property he could mortgage, and figure out pretty quickly he didn’t have enough to pay. It was only a game, but you could tell that he was feeling all the shame and embarrassment of a real-life bankruptcy. And that’s when Dad might say, “Why don’t you just pay me on your next trip around.” It was almost unheard of in our games—a reprieve! The look on Greg’s face was all gratitude, and when it was his turn to roll the dice next time around he would pass go, collect \$200, and be back in the game again. And even if he lost, eventually, he wouldn’t forget what Dad had done for him. He owed him a whole lot more than Monopoly money.

In Luke 16 Jesus tells a story about a man whose luck has just run out. He's been accused of mismanaging his master's money, and the master calls him on the carpet. "What's this I hear about you?" he says. "I want you to bring in the books so I can have a look at them, and then I want you to clean out your desk. You're fired!" On his way back to the office the manager wonders, "What will I do? I'm not strong enough to dig and I'm too proud to beg." But then he has an idea—a brilliant idea—and he calls in all his master's creditors. "How much do you owe?" he says to one. "A hundred jugs of oil." "Here, sit down, take your bill and make it fifty." "And you," he says to another. "How much do you owe?" "A hundred measures of wheat," he says. "Fine, take your bill and write eighty instead." And so it goes, until all the master's creditors go home with their debts reduced and their appreciation of this manager enlarged. When he comes knocking on their door a few days later, they will welcome him in.

And when the master hears about it, instead of roaring with anger, instead of throwing the dishonest manager into the outer darkness "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," he looks him up and down with admiration, and, like one good Monopoly player to another, commends him for his shrewdness. And that's when Jesus says to his disciples, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

No matter how many times I read this parable I'm never ready for that ending. I look back through the story to see if I've missed something. Was it really the master, and not the manager, who was cheating people out of their money? Was the manager just trying to make things right again by eliminating some exorbitant interest payment? Or was it his own money he was giving up—his "commission," as it were—in order to

endear himself to those creditors? I've gone through the story with a fine-toothed comb, and read all the best commentaries, but in the end it seems to come back to this: that the manager was cheating his master in order to secure his own future. This is the parable of "the Dishonest Manager" after all and it is Jesus who gives the parable its name: in verse 8 he says, "and the master commended *the dishonest manager* because he had acted shrewdly." The manager was a good Monopoly player, in other words, and the master recognized that, but it was all, somehow, just a game, and Jesus recognized that.

At the end of the parable he hands out these sayings to his disciples like "Get out of Jail Free" cards: "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light" he says; and, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that, when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes"; and, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much"; and, "If you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?"; and "If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?"; and, "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other"; and, finally, "You cannot serve God and wealth."

Somehow Jesus' disciples were supposed to take all that and make sense of it, just as we are today, but that's impossible. This is the hardest parable of all, and all I can do is thank God that Jesus didn't say to me, as he said to his disciples on another occasion, "Have you understood all this?" Because I would have to say to him, "No. Not at all. I don't think I understand any of it." But here's the thing: when it comes to material

possessions, Jesus is the most detached person in the world. He says, “Why do you worry about the body, what you will eat, or clothing, what you will wear? Your Father will give you what you need. Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” and you know what? The Son of Man is OK with that! He doesn’t care about money. He seems almost amused by the way people grab it and hoard it, like children playing a game of Monopoly. And so he points out the behavior of this dishonest steward, who bends the rules in his favor to make sure he still has a few friends at the end of the game. “See there? Jesus says. That’s the way you do it. Not that you cheat you master, but that you remember it’s just a game.” And here’s what leads me toward that understanding: Jesus says, “If you have not been faithful with dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches.” Did you hear that? “The *true* riches,” making it clear that from his point of view those other riches are false. So this green stuff with the numbers on it?—well, it’s just Monopoly money, and the world that claws and scratches to get it?—well, those are children playing a game, but real life in the real world?—well, that’s something else altogether.

When we used to play those Monopoly games back in the day my mother would always be the first one out of the game, and she always seemed relieved. She would go off to heat the water and wash the supper dishes. But she would come back in from time to time see how the game was going and to ask if we needed more popcorn. She would look down on the world of that game and smile or praise or pat some poor child on the shoulder. She was above it all. She wasn’t caught up in it like we were. She could see it for what it really was—a board game.

I wonder if that's the way God watches over the world and over our greedy squabbling for wealth? Does he want us to know there's a way to play this game so that you have more friends at the end than at the beginning? Does it break his heart when he sees someone holding a wad of cash, exulting, while someone else dissolves in tears? Does it break his heart further to see the gap widening between people who have everything and those who have nothing at all? I believe that someday we are going to see things as God sees them. Someday we're going to look down on the world like my mother looked down on that Monopoly board, and look at all the people of the world like she looked at her sons sitting around that table. And maybe then, though I hope not only then, we will be able to say, "Oh, my God! Look at these people. Look how they play this game, as if it were a matter of life and death!"

As serious as our Monopoly games were around the table in that old white farmhouse in West Virginia, my Mom and Dad helped us remember that they were just games, and that the Monopoly money that came and went wasn't real money. While learning how to buy and sell, how to speculate and trade, were all worthwhile skills, they taught us that knowing how to laugh and love, how to show mercy and offer grace, were skills that were even more important. I think that's the kind of thing Jesus is trying to teach us here in Luke 16. Yes, use money. Use it wisely, use it well. Give a generous share to the church. But don't ever confuse that false god with the real God, and don't ever confuse this game...

...with life.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2007