

Business Mismanagement & Unjust Forgiveness

18 September 2022

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts,
be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

Let us begin with a reminder on Parables, since this is the second week of a current lectionary stretch in which we encounter numerous parables of Jesus. The parables are messy, but that is not a bad thing. Parables invite us into a holy messiness which both requires and challenges faith, and in that challenge our faith grows. This is most certainly true as we hear and consider this parable from the opening verses of Luke 16. Many interpreters suggest that this parable is one of, if not the, most challenging of all Jesus' parables.

So, I say it again: remember that it is by faith we hear the parables as God's life-giving Word, and it is because of faith that we are challenged, and it is through faith that we grow closer to God.

The challenge with this parable in particular hinges on verse 8: And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

The trouble is that this dishonest manager, this unjust steward, is commended! And for what reason: because he acted shrewdly, or wisely, as the Greek word is usually translated. The manager is effective in his administration, there is no question of that. But is his action righteous or unrighteous? Just or unjust?

And Jesus, ever the teacher who challenges us deeply, says after the parable that ¹⁰"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." What are we to make of this? What does this mean for our faith?

Recently, my own relationship to this particular parable has changed greatly. We're approaching the first anniversary of my father's death. Over the course of this year, I have functioned as the personal representative of his estate.

Much of my role has been similar to the steward's in the fact that I'm dealing with debts and paying accounts. While he was reducing debts, I have been the one asking what a company is willing to accept as payment to settle an account. I've been striving to be the best, most faithful steward of the estate as I can. But do we consider what that looks like?

In my own experience, being a good steward, being responsible with funds, has been much negotiating with collection agencies about a reasonable settlement. [When preaching this sermon, I added a brief story about a specific event related to my dad's estate. In short: A I settled a large debt for approximately half, saving thousands, because it had the potential to be a legal dispute between the company and the estate. My attorney advised that such ruling was a toss-up, going either way depending on any given judge any given day.] Is that righteous or unrighteous? Is just or unjust to haggle over a debt someone else owed? For some of you, the answer may be clear, but I land on it being more complicated "yes or no."

Furthermore, when I hear the words of Jesus about faithfulness and dishonesty, I am cut deep because I am not always sure if my negotiations are out of stewardship or selfishness. Because, when its all said and done and the estate is closed, whatever is left goes

to my brother and me. Jesus' final words in verse 13, "You cannot serve God and wealth" stings.

And maybe you join me in the pain when we hear this text. Maybe this parable is also one of God's Law reminding us of our sin and need for salvation. Maybe this time Jesus stretches our faith further than we would like and we're left asking the question, "where God is in the story?"

We explored questions like that last week. We considered which characters serve as metaphors for God, or Jesus, or the Spirit. We might also ask what aspects symbolize Kingdom of God and who we relate to within the parable. And people, time and again have considered the various perspectives of this terribly challenging parable.

Last week you heard me say that any answer we have which attempts to solve the parable will be unsatisfying because the parables are not meant to be solved. But they certainly expand our faith and teach us about God. And sometimes we do stumble upon something that speaks deeply. No, should not consider it the one and only solution, because again, the parables are not meant to be solved. But let us consider again the question of "Where is God?"

How does this parable speak to us if we begin with God first. With God who created us; with God whose only Son, God from God, came to earth as one of us and modeled right living to the point of death on the cross. God, who in Jesus Christ's death, forgives sins and God, who in resurrection, brings about new life.

How does this parable change if we consider that our God is in the business of forgiveness. That the owner of this estate is in the business of forgiveness. This steward, then, is not living up to the expectations of the owner of the estate. The manager has been squandering property, mismanaging the business. After this conversation with the owner of the estate, this steward changes his ways. We could say he repents. Scripture says he wises up, becomes shrewd. The owner, like God, is in the business of forgiveness, and he expects those entrusted as stewards to do the same.

Now, you might be questioning this interpretation. After all, what business could ever be successful if all it did was forgive debts. May we again hear Jesus' words: "You cannot serve God and wealth." And further, let us remember Jesus has been in the business of upsetting norms, of turning tables, of inverting and upsetting the world around him as he begins his journey to Jerusalem.

So too is something radically different in this parable. Let us not approach the parable as capitalists, thinking that profit is the goal of this business. After all, God is indeed in the business of forgiveness, and for debtors, this is all good news.

May we know that by Christ Jesus we are forgiven our debts and through Christ Jesus we forgive our debtors. And for any who felt convicted by this text and reminded that you and I are sinners, may we know, trust, and believe all that more that our God is in the business of forgives, and this is most certainly good news for sinners like us.

Amen.