

Sermon for Sunday, September 18, 2022

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“A Parable is not a Fable”

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Have you ever been that kid at a pool with a beach ball? The one who pushes the beach ball under the surface, maybe sits on it, and then after pushing and struggling to keep it underwater, after letting the water go still, pulls their hands back or shifts their body weight such that the ball flies into the air and then, BAM - out of nowhere it hits some unexpected sibling or friend? Me too.

I think about that image when we read parables like today's gospel reading. Today's parable of the dishonest manager is a strange one, a surprising one - like that beach ball. We don't really know where it's going until it shoots up from the surface in Jesus' last statement, and even then we're not entirely sure what happened.

Let's unpack it a bit. So there is this wealthy man whose household manager has been embezzling, or overspending. As scripture says, he was "wasting his estate." We're not entirely sure how, or to what extent, but word has gotten back to the "master," and he's not pleased. So he demands that this manager give him a full account of his accounts on his way out the door. To be clear: The manager has been fired. He's done.

Well, this dishonest manager starts freaking out. He may be dishonest with his boss, but he's very honest with himself: He knows he's too weak for hard labor, and too proud to beg. But when it becomes public knowledge that he's an embezzler, he'll never be able to find another management job again. He knows that. So he starts laying the groundwork for his future by ingratiating himself. He goes from house to house, reducing debts owed to his current former boss by as much as half, so that once word gets out, someone else will still think well of him, hire him, maybe refer him to another household, maybe start the whole cycle over again.

This is not a person you expect to be the good guy in the story. And yet, the story ends with the master commending the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly. Certainly, embezzling your boss' profits and then reducing the principal his debtors owe him is clever; but it's certainly not honest and doesn't help the master in any way. This parable is not a lesson in good business strategy, that's for sure.

But then Jesus, contrary to expectation, compliments the children of this age, rather than the elders who strive to follow him, as having more capacity for this same shrewdness. Jesus tells the disciples, and by extension us, to use our wealth for the present help of others, even by dishonest means, because you cannot serve God and wealth.

BAM. There's that beach ball. Jesus just launched it out from under the water, and we're all sitting here a little stunned, confused about what is happening, and it stings a little bit. You don't expect Jesus to commend people for being dishonest, but that's exactly what happens. So what are we, as followers of Christ, supposed to do with that?

First things first: A parable is not a fable with a sweet little moral at the end of the story. A parable does not provide us with rules that will make our lives neat, orderly, and easy; nor does it teach us how to go about our day with dignity. None of that exists in the story of the dishonest manager, or frankly in any other parable. How many of us have lost a dime and scoured the house for it? We're far more likely to cut our losses and go about our day. How many of you have paid your workers the same whether they've worked an hour or a day? There we are with the bad business models again. I'd wager that you've never picked your mortal enemy up off the side of the road from an injury that they probably had coming, and then paid their hospital bill, either.

No, a parable is not a fable. A parable is a story that demonstrates the kingdom of God at hand, as Jesus proclaimed. Parables shock us out of our expectations, make us question our fundamental values in this world, and show us the ways in which God is at work.

So if we're looking at the dishonest manager, we need to look at the larger context of expectations and values that surround him. He is one player within a larger, unjust economic system - a slaveholding system. He manages the books for a wealthy slaveholder, whose wealth is built up on the oppression and debts of his neighbors. Which is to say, there is not simply one unjust man in this parable.

Of course, this sort of economic system, in which wealth is built on the backs of the poor, is not unique to this parable. One only needs to listen to Jeremiah's lament from 600 years prior, crying over the cacophony of the poor who, even after the harvest has ended, after money has been made, are stuck in their poverty. I'm also reminded of Barbara Ehrenreich's book, *Nickel and Dimed*, from 20 years ago, in which she worked minimum wage jobs in the United States for a year and wrote about what it's like to patch together a life on the bare minimum. In it, she harrowingly describes what it does to an entire class of people when the American economic system is built on their backs and their poverty. She wrote:

“When someone works for less pay than she can live on — when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently — then she has made a great sacrifice for you ... The 'working poor,' as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.

Just like the world in which Jesus lived, the systems in which we live our lives are harsher for some and more complex for all than any one of us can fix. And for too long, the church has tried to convince itself, we have tried to convince ourselves, that as long

as we go to church, as long as we follow the rules, we are good, we are set. Heaven is the goal.

Heaven is not the goal, at least not entirely. Heaven is not just the reward for following the rules, like dessert after you eat your vegetables. Again and again throughout his ministry, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is ours, here and now. The opening message of the gospel is not about what will happen someday but what is happening now to all of creation, to our neighbors, to ourselves, to all that surrounds us. We can choose to build hell every day as we support systems that divide and oppress, under the guise of following the rules and not rocking the boat. Or, we can choose to build heaven on earth and love the hell out of this world.

It's our call. It is tempting to think that our only options for living within complex and troubling systems are accommodation or resistance. But the reality for most people, whether in the Roman Empire or the United States, is more akin to negotiation, choosing who or what to prioritize with less-than-ideal options. When nothing seems great, all you can choose is the next right thing.

Parables like this one remind us that as followers of Jesus, our values, our actions should step toward the all-embracing love and liberation of all God's children. Even if it's messy. Even if it's complicated. Even when it overturns long-held, deeply embedded societal expectations.

But look: The entire crux of our faith is that a convicted felon, a man executed by the state, is the bearer of God's forgiving and transforming love. We expect our God to show up like a king - with wealth, and power, and authority - and instead we get Jesus: Blessed are the poor, love your enemies, let me wash your grimy feet Jesus. BAM. There's that beach ball again.

With regard to the dishonest manager, the point isn't that he's good. The point isn't that he's bad. It's that, in this one instance, he didn't focus on upholding an unjust system. He put people ahead of money; and the kingdom of God is filled with people who do the same.

Thanks be to God, and Amen.