

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

September 18, 2022
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:1-13
Amos 8:4-7
Psalm 113
1 Timothy 2:1-7

Our Gospel reading this morning contains one of my all time favorite parables. I love this parable because it is absolutely confusing and strange. As first reading it makes no sense whatsoever. It's almost like a riddle or a visit to the Upside Down World. It doesn't fit what we think we know to be true.

Let's start with a short Q&A to help solve the riddle at hand. Who is the good person in our Gospel reading from Luke? We have the master (the rich man), the manager, and the debtors. Here is what we are told of each...

The rich man, the master, has found out that his manager has been squandering his property. The master tells the man he may no longer be his manager because he has been dishonest. The manager panics. He is worried he will not be able to get another job so he does the one thing he can do. He gathers up the debtors...the people who owe the master money.

And in an interesting turn of events the manager lessens what is owed by person. He is able to collect some of what they owe the master but not all of it. And, he then closes out each debt as complete. The master is actually pleased at the manager's shrewdness and commends the manager. Job well done! That's the overview of the parable.

So, let me ask again? Who is the good person in this story? The master, the manager, or the debtors? And, why in the world does Jesus tell this parable? At first read, it doesn't make much sense. It's as though Jesus is commending the dishonesty of the manager. He got caught for doing a bad job and tries to make some half hearted amends for his inadequate fulfillment of his duties.

Some interpretations hold that this parable is about our priorities...that slippery slope when money becomes more important than integrity or more important than faith. That would be the verse at the end of the reading – you can't serve God and wealth. Therefore, you might consider this to be a parable about how we spend our money...which might solve our riddle of who is the good person one way.

Other interpretations argue that this is about your work ethic. In that case, the master was just reinforcing the rules and it was the manager's job to follow the rules. Thus, we have been given guidelines for our own good. That interpretation certainly has a clear cut explanation of right and wrong.

Those are both reasonable ways to look at this text. But, as is true for any riddle, the answer isn't always so clear cut. So let's keep considering...

Now, what if I gave you more historical information? Remember that this story is set within the Roman world. That's our backdrop. The Romans have come into Judea as occupiers of the land. They were using its resources and its people. They were gaining advantages for themselves at the detriment to those poorer communities in and around Galilee.

The Romans would tax farmers based upon the farmer's resources, things like olive oil and wheat. But, these were often very poor farmers and payment was often difficult for them. Thus, a system of debtors began to grow creating a harsh economic hierarchy. And, it was in the manager's hands to collect these payments. Life was hard and debts might have to be paid at the detriment of one's family and to the detriment of their ability to buy food and provide for themselves.

The trouble with this parable is that we are only given a rough outline of the scenario. We aren't told people's motives. We aren't told their life circumstances or their personal struggles. We know nothing of their relationships or the economic status of each. We don't know if they are hungry or sick or had children to care for. The parable as it stands is strictly a transactional story. Black and white. Good and bad.

Yet, how often is life really that black and white? Life is much more complicated. We all know that. We have all faced times in our lives when we couldn't get all of the work done, all of things required of us because something had gone terribly wrong in our personal lives. Yet, we wanted to do all that was required of us. We tried and we tried hard.

But, maybe we still had to miss an important meeting because our child was sick. Maybe we missed an important deadline because we were dealing with an aging parent who needed us more on that particular day. Maybe we missed a mortgage payment because we were laid off from our job. In those scenarios our desire to do what was right never wavered but our circumstances made it very hard to get it all done.

If you have experienced that kind of moment, did you ever have someone who understood? Who looked closer at what was going on and gave you grace? Someone who said, I know it is hard and I know how you feel so let me help you? I know I had those people enter my life at incredibly crucial times. And when they showed up they gave me hope. They showed me love. They showed me that life was not going to get the best of me. It was a kindness extended to me because someone took the time to understand.

Now...let's look at our story again. Why would Jesus celebrate the "dishonest" manager? Let's try for a moment to put aside our black and white surface definitions of good and bad. What if we knew more of this story? What if the manager was the one who understood how hard the farmers were working? What if he knew the individual family situations?

Maybe one of the debtors was working a couple of jobs just to pay the bills. Maybe this other debtor had a child with special needs and required extra one on one time with his parents thus taking them away from other important responsibilities. Maybe this other debtor had just lost a spouse and was still deep in grief and was having a hard time putting one foot in front of the other. Maybe another debtor had been dealing with cancer and was still undergoing treatment and was too weak to do all of his work.

What if the manager was actually showing compassion? Not squandering the resources of the master for of his own personal gain but offering grace where grace was desperately needed? What if he knew a deeper truth and acted upon his ability to help others? What if he was the good one?

What if the master was the one refusing to listen to what each person was dealing with? What if he didn't care? What if he refused to listen to the crises and injustices that the debtors faced?

With this in mind, does the parable take on new meaning? I hope it does. I hope it pushes you to think about times in your life where you have relied on the black and the white, the easy answers, instead of digging in deeper to look at the true complexity of a situation.

I like to think that Jesus is calling us to task. Calling us to deal with the tough questions, the difficult solutions, the often divisive issues that continue to harm our communities, our families and our world. I like to think that Jesus is pulling us out of our black and white comfort zones to deal with issues that require us to have heart.

In other words, Jesus might be saying...don't be so quick to judge. Step back and see where there is a better response, a more compassionate response.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls this a Christian Ethic. He says that what Jesus is trying to teach is that we all, "stand before the face of God, God's grace rules over you; you are at the disposal of someone else in the world and you must act and work for God. So be mindful in your actions that you are acting under God's eyes, and that God's will must be done."

At the end of the day, we don't know who is good in this story. Because as it is presented, we only have the black and white version. I think Jesus is calling us to know more, to ask, to listen, to learn. To see the depth of people's humanity and to offer grace, God's grace where we are able.

How would that change our understanding of this parable? Why does Jesus tell this parable? I think he tells it because he wants us to work harder to open our hearts to the needs of others, to stop judging circumstances that we only have a surface understanding of. Jesus's one command is to love one another and that love must exist in the depths of our lived experience, in the complicated circumstances of the world we live in. It must exist so that we can listen more deeply, care more fully, and love more boldly. That is our Christian ethic. Amen.