

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Proper 20 Year C  
September 18, 2016

When we introduce a parable our Godly Play class, we bring out a beautiful gold box, and we wonder with the children if there is a parable inside. We tell them that parables, these puzzling and intriguing stories of Jesus, are very important and very old and were given to them before they were born. We also tell them that this box has a lid, like a door that is shut. And sometimes there's a lid on the parable that keeps us from getting inside. The storyteller wonders aloud, "Why", and we too may wonder why Jesus' stories aren't clearer and more to the point. The storyteller then says to the children, "Don't be discouraged. Keep coming back to the parable and one day it will open for you."

Our parable today, often titled, the Dishonest Manager, or the Unjust Steward, is one of the most confusing parables in our scriptures. Many commentators wonder aloud if the translation is wrong. We have become used to Jesus giving us surprise endings in his parables, such as the story right before this one in the gospel of Luke, in which the prodigal son returns after squandering his inheritance, ready to work as a lowly hired hand at his father's farm, and instead is wildly embraced with love and acceptance by his father, and given a ring the best robe, and an extravagant feast. But how can it be, in our story today, that the rich landlord AND Jesus praise the manager for his dishonesty? To understand the truth of this parable, we need to keep coming back to it, so one day it will open for us.

One helpful key in unlocking this parable can be offered to us by Amy Jill-Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar. She offers her commentary on the parables through the lens of what we know most about Jesus in the rest of the Gospel tradition~ Jesus cared deeply about reconciliation, and so he told stories about people who were torn apart and how they might be brought together.

So where is the reconciliation happening in our story today, where are the people torn apart and how are they being brought together? One place we can imagine it happens is in the relationship between the manager and the debtors. The slanted structure of the economic system of the time was such that the landlord would charge inflated rent on the fields to restrain the laborers from purchasing their own land thus ensuring the landlord's wealth and higher social status. The manager, whose job it was to collect the rent, also added interest to the overblown fee, which not only furthered the debt of the laborers, but also violated their covenantal law. When the manager eliminated the

interest owed through his reduction of the amount collected from the laborers, he began the process of turning over the tables of the unjust economic system which oppressed the poor. It was out of self-interest, but resulted in a reconciling of the life of the laborers with a more just economic system and it was a reconciliation of the manager to the laborers, because he was finally being fair in his transactions with them. That sounds a bit like kingdom work, of what Mary sang of in the Magnificat, (he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly). That sounds a bit like building relationships whose foundation is fairness, rather than on a power structure that drives the poor further into poverty.

At the root of this parable is a message about the stewardship of our resources and the impact this has on our relationships.

We all have resources. We all have some free time, we all have many gifts given to us by God to use in the world, and we may all have some amount of money to share with others. We also may have the resources of a spirit of generosity, attentiveness to the needs of others, expressiveness of compassion, a spiritual lens through which to view the world, an ability to lift other people's spirits through our humor, and so on. Gifts and resources show up in many ways. Some of us have an abundance of resources; others a scarcity. But we all have resources and how we use our resources will frame and determine our relationships.

I believe one message in our parable this morning may be that whatever our resources and however many of them we may have at the moment, we have a choice to make: we can use them to reconcile relationships, which allows the kingdom of God to emerge among us, or we can use them as a manipulator of the power differential in our relationships, which blocks the flow of God into our world.

If we use our resources to strengthen or build community, show respect to others, create a circle of caring friends, express love, then we have the right link between our resources and our relationships. We can tell we have it right when people respond with generosity to us or to others, when we inspire commitment in others to love and serve other people, when an obligation of the heart for others emerges in those around us. We can call this an inner indebtedness of the heart. When we use our resources rightly in our relationships, we find hope emerges. This is based on trust. Trust in each other and trust that together something new and good can be created by the sharing of our resources.

However, the opposite can happen and we know that this true when it is fear that emerges. This can happen in our intimate relationships, between friends who are adults, between parents and children, as well as within our church and civic communities,

and in our global society. This is not based on trust, but fear and the misuse of power. It is the use of resources to gain power and to create an indebtedness in others which can be collected at our very whim. It's easiest to see when money is involved:

those who have more money expect to have a louder voice which carries more weight in decision making and exerts the power to oppress other people's ideas or sense of worth. It also happens in service, in offering your time to something else. When the common good is not the goal, but rather personal recognition and admiration, one can feel entitled to a certain status or position of power. This happened when the Standing Committee was appointing people to the Bishop's Search Committee. A person came up to me as the President of the Standing Committee, and said that since he had served the diocese in so many ways and over such a long time, he deserved to be on this committee. He thought he had created a sense of indebtedness in others, for positions of what he considered powerful, that would be repaid upon his demand. I simply explained that wasn't how it worked, not in this part of the kingdom of God.

As I continued to unlock the series of doors which at times seemed to imprison the meaning of this parable for me this week, the sparkling treasure behind the smallest of doors was the word indebtedness: owing someone something. Indebtedness, in my opinion, is neither inherently good nor bad. But if owing someone something inspires in me trust, hope and love, and reconciles me with one another and to God, then I believe it is of the Kingdom of God, for how can we hear this parable and not comprehend its connectedness to our indebtedness to God.

We are indebted to God for our lives, for our love of God and each other, and for all that we can offer to the world. God has given us everything and that alone allows us to trust, hope, and love and use our resources toward that which Jesus, God's greatest gift to us, is all about: reconciliation, building trust, sharing love, and building community.

As Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop said in his video released this week, we are about "life reoriented around the teachings of Jesus and around his very spirit, teaching and spirit which embodies the love of God in our lives and in this world, a way of love that seeks the good and well-being of others before the self's own unenlightened interest, a way of love that is not self-centered but other directed. A way of love grounded in compassion, goodness, justice and forgiveness: loving, liberating and life-giving and that is what the way of Jesus is all about." Our response to being indebted to God for all that we are and all that we have is to live this way, to be a part of the Jesus Movement, to use our resources toward reconciliation and love.

I invite you this morning, when you come forward to receive the healing and reconciling power of Christ through communion, to bend your knee in gratitude and love for all you have been given, and gratefully receive the nourishment so freely offered to us, so that

we might create together a community of love, based upon generosity and gratitude, of reconciliation and healing, and one centered in the teachings of Jesus, for this is what the kingdom of God looks like. And I want that to be us. Amen.