

Introduction

The parable of the unjust steward is one about which no less a biblical authority than St. Augustine said "I can't believe this story came from the lips of our Lord". It is generally considered to be one of the most difficult passages in Luke. I seem to have had a number of these tough texts of late and I must say that for some time I did not know what to make of this one.

Apparently, there are many preachers who recall reading these verses from the pulpit and then looking up to the blank stares of worshippers who were similarly perplexed.

The difficulty of this text lies in the seeming endorsement of the underhanded actions of the unjust steward by his master and even by Jesus.

A dishonest employee is commended by his boss? That's not how we want the world to be. That's not what we teach our kids. That's not what we expect Jesus to say or to encourage.

There has been much discussion about this text and a lot of scholarly study too; but with all this study and discussion there is still no consensus on what Jesus actually meant with this parable.

However, I have been tasked with preaching from this text so I shall give it a try. Let's lean into it, making note of the context, and let's see what there is here for us to grab hold of and learn from.

Body of the Text

The parable

In this parable we find a rich man who makes his living from tenant farmers. These tenants often paid rent for the land not with money but with a portion of the agricultural produce from the land. So, if one grew olives then rent was paid in olives, and if one grew wheat then rent was paid in wheat. Unfortunately the farmer's harvest is never enough to pay the rent and still provide for his family. As a result the tenants would fall deeper and deeper into debt, working harder and harder to pay what they simply could not afford.

In Palestine at that time there were also many absentee landlords who hired stewards to collect rent for them. These stewards were just a step above the farmers with just enough education to keep records and not enough moral integrity to refuse to participate in such an unjust system.

In our parable the steward has been accused of squandering the master's resources and so is fired by the master. This would have dramatic implications for the steward, as losing his job would likely make him an outcast in the community as well; the farmers would likely have nothing to do with him since he was the one collecting the rent each month.

Realizing this, the steward does something very clever, he gathers the farmers together and tells them that a portion of their debts have been forgiven; so much so that the farmers may even have felt hope that they could emerge from the heavy weight of their debt – perhaps they could now even afford to repay this more-manageable sum and then might even buy some seed, or purchase a herd of their own. But, the steward does all this while having just been fired, so without the knowledge of the landowner or his approval.

Now the landowner has a choice to make when he first finds out. Does he tell the farmers that there has been a mistake and that they will not be receiving the discount they had anticipated, or does he enjoy his new-found acclaim among the farmers?

Actually some have suggested that the master himself may have been acting unjustly with his tenants by charging interest on the amount owed (something not allowed in Jewish custom) and that the steward had forgiven only *that* portion of the debt. If this were the case then the master could not complain too loudly or else risk being exposed himself for treating his tenants unfairly.

In either case, the master will now most likely also take the steward back, ensuring that his own dealings will not be exposed and not wanting to upset the farmers who now are very pleased with the steward too. But even if the master does not take him back, the steward will have found favour with the farmers again and will have a community to come home to. This seems a very smart play by the steward. Even the master commends him for his shrewd thinking (verse 8).

All is good right?

Tension

Well, all is good except for the fact that what the steward did was completely dishonest.

Yet there is a tension here too: the steward was dishonest and shrewd and yet he has been commended by his master and seemingly by Jesus too. It seems such an unusual message for one of Jesus' parables.

I wondered as I was reflecting on this text, what did the steward really do that may be important for us to hear? Well, one thing is clear, he forgives (he forgives a portion of the tenant's debt to the master). He forgives.

Forgiveness

It is true that he forgives things he has no right to forgive. He forgives for all the wrong reasons – but he forgives none-the-less.

Perhaps this is the message of this strange parable:

Go ahead and forgive, forgive it all, forgive it now, and even forgive for selfish reasons or for no reason at all. It is never wrong to forgive and it is our invitation into new and deeper relationship with each other and with God.

Our model for this happens right here, at Zion Lutheran Church, each Sunday morning. Here too we are called to account, as was the steward. We begin each service with what we call *confession and forgiveness*. In effect God is asking us how we are doing; and here is how we respond:

“...we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.”

That's right; we do not always do so well. Now look at God's response (pg. 212)

...we are promised the entire forgiveness of all our sin; period – that is grace. There are no clauses, no exceptions, and no conditions to this forgiveness and to grace. We are simply saved by the love and mercy of a God who cherishes us beyond measure. All our sins are forgiven. Amazing.

It is through this personal experience of unconditional, unmerited, and infinite love and forgiveness from God that a worldview of scarcity can be transformed into a life of abundance – that is a world with ever-expanding levels of love, trust, kindness, friendship... and forgiveness. That is when the gates of mercy are blown wide open.

And this is the model we are asked to emulate, we are invited to forgive each other too.

When we forgive, we not only say, "I no longer hold your offense against you" but we also free ourselves from the weight of being the "offended one".

As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us. It is a real temptation to cling in anger to those who have injured us and then define ourselves as being wounded by them. Forgiveness releases not only the one we forgive but also ourselves.

So there are two sides to forgiveness: giving and receiving. Although *offering* forgiveness may seem to be more difficult than *receiving* it, I am not sure this is always true.

Only as people who have accepted forgiveness can we find the inner liberty to offer it. And this begins each Sunday morning with our receiving the forgiveness of God at the beginning of each service. We are invited to receive this gift with joy and to leave here with a heart equipped to peaceably forgive others as well.

And so I wonder, is there someone we could forgive today? Someone who has done us wrong, someone who has injured us unjustly? Perhaps a friend, a family member, your spouse or ex-spouse, or another member right here at Zion. Any reason will do:

Forgive out of love;

Forgive in Jesus' name;

Forgive because we are reminded that we also are forgiven each Sunday morning;

Forgive because we want to be free of the burden of bitterness;

Forgive because we know that we will need to be forgiven countless times in the future ourselves; or

Forgive because the sky is blue.

There is no bad reason to forgive. It also reminds us of our mutual reliance on the mercy of God. This is a mature, living spirituality. It is what it means to be in relationship.

And so I wonder again: is there someone we could forgive today; and is there forgiveness that we may accept from another?

Seeing God in each other

The difficulty is that authentic forgiveness can be an incredibly difficult task. Holding on to past hurts may seem many times easier than letting them go. But even so, we are called to forgive.

I remember reading about an experiment where two people were asked to just sit across from each other and just look at each other. This went on for many minutes. As time went by the connection became deeper and deeper until one or both participants was eventually overcome with emotion, touched by what they saw in the other.

Seeing the sacred in each other makes it a moot point...of course we forgive each other, from sacred to sacred, we forgive. Seeing God in each other and the world makes forgiveness a simpler task.

This is the *hidden integrity of grace*. It is everywhere and runs through all of us and all things –through the tree in the forest, through the 2 deer grazing in the field, through the swans in the river, through the souls of each one of us. Once in a while we get a glimpse of it...it causes great joy...but it also recedes...it then creates a longing for the experience to return – a longing for God. This is built into each one of us. And this happens over and over in our lives (*we glimpse God – there is great joy – he recedes – the longing grows*); inviting us to experience God more fully, day-by-day – in the natural world, in our activities, and in each other...it is the immediacy of God in our daily living.

There is this joy and then a knowing, that God is with us, but more than that - God is beside us, God is above us, God is below us. Grace permeates every aspect of our lives and being. There is an integrity in this; we can count it; it is an unconditional promise.

You see, *God is grace*. The essence of God is this promise. There are no divisions. Grace and God are everywhere.

How then can we not forgive?

Amen