



Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
September 22, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A priest was being honored at a retirement dinner after serving a parish for 35 years. A wealthy businessman and member of the congregation was chosen to make the presentation and to give a little speech at the dinner. However, he was running late, so the Priest decided to say his own few words while they waited:

“I got my first impression of the parish from the first confession I heard here. I thought I had been assigned to a terrible place. The very first person whose confession I heard told me that he had embezzled hundreds of thousands of dollars from his company and cooked the books to hide his theft. I was appalled. But as the days went on I learned that my people were not all like that and I had, indeed, come to a fine parish full of good and loving people.”

Just as the Priest finished his talk, the wealthy businessman arrived full of apologies at being late. He immediately began to make the presentation and gave his talk:

“I’ll never forget the first day our parish Priest arrived,” said the businessman. “In fact, I had the honor of being the first person to go to him for confession!”

Stealing from your employer doesn’t seem like the kind of behavior that Jesus would endorse and yet here we are – hearing today one of the most cryptic and difficult parables of Jesus, a story in which a thief seems to be praised for his clever embezzlement. The Episcopal theologian Robert Capon has called this the hardest parable in the Gospels – and I think he might be right. But I’ve also found Capon’s insight into this particular story to be helpful and I think you might as well.

First of all I want us to notice that there are some strong but somewhat hidden connections between this parable and the one that comes just before it. The parable that is just before this one is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Just to give you a quick refresher on it, it’s one of three parables that Jesus tells about being lost. He talks about a lost sheep and a lost coin (we heard about those last week) and then he tells the story of a lost son

(we heard about him during Lent this year.) The lost son is one of two brothers. He's the younger of the two and he asks his Dad to give them their inheritance early and the Dad does so – and then the younger son goes to a distant country and squanders that inheritance. When he comes home his Dad welcomes him with open arms and celebrates because his lost son has been found. But the older brother is enraged because it isn't fair that his brother has squandered his inheritance and yet still gets to live the good life with his wealthy family.

The manager in today's parable is "squandering" the rich man's property just like the younger son in the Parable of the Prodigal "squandered" his inheritance in a distant country.

The Father in the Parable of the Prodigal doesn't seek justice – he seeks forgiveness and restored relationship. You might call him the "unjust Father" because he isn't interested in what's fair, he's interested in what brings his children home to him. It would be interesting if we called the Parable of the Prodigal the Parable of the Unjust Father because today's parable is often called the Parable of the Unjust Steward – or, as our more modern translation might call it – the Parable of the Unjust Manager.

Both parables have this idea as a major theme: God is more concerned about mercy, forgiveness, and relationship than he is about law, punishment, and justice. In fact, God is so deeply concerned about mercy, forgiveness, and relationship that from our human perspective God often looks like an Unjust Father or an Unjust Manager.

Secondly, I want us to notice that the manager's failure basically means his life is over – like last week's lost sheep and last week's lost coin, he is dead. In fact, he's so dead that he decides to start hanging out with deadbeats. Right? That's what we call people who won't pay their debts – "deadbeats" – and the manager decides that since he's as good as dead he might as well join in with the other deadbeats and try to help them out by cancelling their debts. Or, if not canceling their debts, then dramatically reducing them.

It's interesting how the Unjust Manager's actions change everyone in the Parable for the better. The rich man goes from being enraged to praising the manager, for example. Why? Perhaps it's because he never thought he'd see a penny of that money that was owed to him and he is delighted to have gotten even 50 or 80 cents on the dollar of the debt. If you've ever lost money when a customer went bankrupt you know that getting back 50 to 80 percent of what you're owed might be quite an accomplishment in some cases.

The deadbeat debtors are also presumably changed for the better because they now have a much more manageable debt that they have some hope of paying off. And, of course, the manager himself is changed for

the better because he was as good as dead but now he has a chance for a new life – either as an honest manager for his rich employer, if all is forgiven, or as an employee of one of those he has helped by his debt reduction program.

Here's the point that I believe Jesus is making. God is not just and God is not fair by human standards and God is not interested in the rules we have set up to determine who is worthy of love and acceptance. God's mercy, love, and forgiveness will often seem unjust to us, even unfair, and God's love will sometimes break our rules. Throughout the Gospel we see Jesus revealing this truth about God to us as he breaks the Sabbath, disregards the rules about who can have dinner with whom, and constantly speaks to us of Unjust Fathers and Unjust Managers.

But God's seemingly unjust love changes the world for the better. God's seemingly unjust love brings families back together, melts the heart of rich old scrooges, and enables those struggling under crushing debts to begin to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

And here is the point for our lives and how we live: thank God that he is not always just or fair according to our rules! Because if God followed our rules we would all be up the creek without a paddle – like the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the lost son, we would all be as good as dead. Instead of God treating us like a judge treats criminals or a rich man treats the people who owe him money, God has treated us like a Father who so passionately loves his children that he will break the rules, cook the books, and leave the rest of the flock behind just to find each one of us and bring us home.

Amen.