

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Rigged Systems

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you get this parable? I'm not entirely sure I do. Why on earth is Jesus lifting up a dishonest manager as a positive example for "the children of light"? I suppose there's a chance that the manager isn't dishonest, after all we're only told the manager has charges laid against him. Those charges could be false. But the actions he takes because of the charges don't seem to be the actions of an innocent person. In fact, he seems to assume that he will lose his position because of the charges and so he acts "shrewdly" as his master will eventually describe his actions.

What about the manager's actions makes them shrewd I wonder? Once again, I'm not sure I fully understand what's going on here. Some theologians argue that the manager was basically forgiving what would have been his fee out of the amount of owed to his master. Others argue that the manager is catching his master in a bind; by forgiving part of the debt, he enhances his master's standing in the community and makes it near impossible for his master to renege on the debt forgiveness. But whatever makes this a "shrewd" action, the result is the same, the manager is ensuring that there will be at least a few people in his community that will have goodwill towards him should he lose his job.

Both of those interpretations rely on interpreting motive and trusting our modern understanding of the historical and cultural context of that time. This means we must approach interpreting this parable with caution, we can easily find ourselves reading too much into the text from our own context. How do we handle these texts that we find difficult to understand and interpret? We consider two things in particular – literary context and our particularly Lutheran interpretive lens of the gospel within the gospel.

First the literary context. This parable comes in the midst of a lengthy teaching section that began in Luke 14:25 in which we learn that Jesus is

teaching large crowds as he travels. Travels to where? Jerusalem and the cross! We get a little more detail regarding the makeup of this crowd in Luke 15:1 which tells us that “all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him” while at the same time there were “Pharisees and the scribes” in the crowds too who were “grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”¹

Following the grumbling of the religiously scrupulous we find Jesus sharing three parables in a row that all have to do with the lost being found: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons (more famously known as the Prodigal Son). After these parables Jesus turns to his disciples (though the Pharisees hear the teaching too²) and shares with them the parable we read today. Jesus then follows this parable up with three moralizing statements about being faithful and ends with the powerful statement “You cannot serve God and wealth.”³

Literary context would have us reading this parable with thoughts of lostness in mind, along with concerns regarding faithfulness and wealth. I wonder if this parable then might be showing us a lost **manager** who gets found and rejoiced over by a merciful master (does commendation equal forgiveness?). I wonder if the manager’s dishonesty was his lostness. The parable doesn’t show the manager fighting the charges after all. Rather he seems to accept the fact that he will be found guilty of “squandering his [master’s] property.”⁴

The manager’s response to the situation is to turn to mercy and connection, knowing that he will soon be relying on community. These actions seem out of the ordinary and shocking in the economy of the world but coming from the same source that will teach “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal”⁵ it makes complete sense. And now we’ve wandered into “gospel within the gospel” territory. We look to other teachings of Christ to help us interpret this one.

So, we need to take this parable and place it within the overarching teachings of Jesus Christ. Again and again in scripture Jesus warns against a

¹ Luke 15:2 (NRSV)

² Luke 16:14 (NRSV)

³ Luke 16:13c (NRSV)

⁴ Luke 16:1c (NRSV)

⁵ Matthew 6:19-20 (NRSV)

preoccupation with wealth and possessions. Again and again in scripture Jesus teaches about mercy, compassion, and the forgiveness of debts. Again and again in scripture Jesus will emphasize the importance of connection and community. Given this theological context it should come as no surprise to find the master in this parable commending the manager when he turns to those values over the values of wealth, power, and indebtedness.

Our other readings today also reinforce the scriptural themes necessary to interpreting this parable. In Amos we find the prophet giving a dire warning to “you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.”⁶ Our Psalm tells us that the Lord “raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.”⁷ Even our reading from Timothy speaks of the great mercy of God’s economy, teaching that God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁸ The parable Jesus tells fits right into these themes of wealth, mercy, and the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is in the habit of calling out rigged and broken systems...which is pretty much every human system. Any system that is not centered on justice, mercy, peace, grace, and love is not a system that God desires for us. We humans make rigged systems, designed to take advantage of one another, build our own power and wealth, and set up in-groups and out-groups. We build rigged systems focused on urgency and productivity, on value and productivity. But we were not created for such systems, we were not created for such values.

We were created for the kingdom of God...for God’s economy...for God’s system. A system that may seem quite bizarre to us, or even rigged in different ways. After all, to those in positions of power and privilege God’s values of justice and equality will seem like systems rigged against them (us) since God’s kingdom calls on those with power and privilege to give up power and privilege for the sake of the powerless and unprivileged. God’s kingdom calls on those with wealth to give up that wealth for the sake of the poor. God’s kingdom calls for the forgiving of debts and the centering of mercy and grace.

Given the choice of our broken system which is rigged to the advantage of the powerful and wealthy versus the system of God which seems to many of

⁶ Amos 8:1 (NRSV)

⁷ Psalm 113:7-8 (NRSV)

⁸ 1 Timothy 2:4 (NRSV)

us as though it is rigged to the advantage of the powerless and oppressed; which would you choose? I know which I would choose in my heart, but I'm not so sure my actions always express that desire. I am generally content to continue in the broken and rigged human systems that I am a part of. Especially the ones that benefit me.

I worry sometimes about what will wake me up out of that selfish contentedness. For the manager it was the potential loss of his position. What will it be for me? Or for you? Will we ever wake up from these systems? I pray that we do, since the system offered by the Way of Christ seems so much more human...so much more the system for which we were made. A system of love and grace, mercy and compassion; things I need more of...things the world needs more of. A system centered on connection and community, the very things we were made for. A system that will mean life for all, life abundant and life eternal. That's a system rigged in God's ways, with God's values. Amen.