

Sermon for Sunday, September 18, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today's words from Jesus
are perhaps the most perplexing
of any recorded
in the gospels.

The parable of the unjust steward,
well it just seems
unjust.
It messes with our sense
of good and bad,
of right and wrong.
One moment
Jesus seems to be saying one thing
and the next
something else,
and none of it really
makes sense.

It's such a contrast with last week's parables, the lost sheep
and the lost coin,
and the one in between those and today's reading,
that our preacher last week,
Peter Rodgers,
called the lost sons
but but is more widely known
as the prodigal son.
There
Jesus' message is clear;
this one
not so much!

And so I was grateful this week
when I discovered that one of my friends, Dylan Breuer,
had spent the best part of a year studying this text in college, and wrote her thesis about
it.
And so I'm borrowing heavily from Dylan's work.

http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/09/proper_20_year_.html

And this is how she reimagines the parable:

A very, very rich man lives in a big city,
perhaps Jerusalem.
His life of luxury
is made possible
by the income of an estate
that he owns in the countryside.

He's hired a steward, a manager, to run it
while he parties in Jerusalem,
and all of the work
of planting and harvesting
is done by peasants
whose grandparents might once have owned the land
but lost it in payment to a debt.

Now
the peasants work the land
as tenant farmers,
buying what they need from the company store
at highly inflated prices
with whatever is left over
after the exorbitant rent is paid to the landowner.
The harvest is never quite enough to pay the rent
and the everyday things
that the family needs,
so they slip further and further into debt,
working harder and harder
to pay what can't be paid.

They hardly ever see the landowner.
As far as they are concerned, it's the steward
who is charge.
They know him:
he likely came from one of their families,
and somehow managed
to get the landowner's attention

and get enough education
to keep records
and was hired.

Hired to keep the landowner happy and the stream of money to the city flowing
and to do whatever it takes
to keep the tenants
hard at work.

But then the landowner
began to hear rumors.
Rumors that his steward
was squandering his resources. Wasting them.
And he fires him.

So the steward
is no longer authorized to do anything at all
in the master's name.
The farmers - who are probably his relatives -
aren't likely to take him in either.
After all, up till now
he's allied himself with the landowner
by taking a job that involves
collecting exorbitant rents,
running the company store,
and generally dealing unjustly with the farmers.

So what does the steward do?
Well, he's the record keeper.
He knows all the details
of who owes money
and how much.
And so he remove a couple of zeroes here
and a few more there, changes some sevens to ones,
and then gathers all of the farmers and tells them
that their debts have been reduced from the rough equivalent of "a million bazillion
kajillion dollars"
to something that maybe could be repaid.
Of course he doesn't tell them
that he's actually been fired,
and that the landowner

hasn't authorized him to do any of this.

And the farmers
can't believe it.

They are lucky enough - or so they think - to work for the most generous landowner around. He's a hero,
and so too, by extension, is the steward.

And then the landowner arrives. Now that he's fired the steward, he has to check on things himself, at least until he can find a new manager.

And as he comes over the crest of the hill
before heading down into the valley where his farm is,
he gets a surprise.

The road is lined by cheering farmers.
They're shouting his name, telling him he's a hero.
He has no idea
what's going on.

Finally he gets to the estate house,
and someone tells him
what the steward has done.

Now he has a choice to make.

He can go outside to the assembled crowd —
the people shouting blessings upon him and all his family — and tell them that it was all a terrible mistake,
that the steward's generosity was an act of crookedness
and won't hold water legally.
The cheering will turn to boos,
and who knows what else.

Or
he can go outside and take in the cheering of the crowd.
He can take credit for the steward's actions,
and take in the acclaim of the farmers,
but he'll have to take the steward back.
Mistreat the steward,
who brought such good news of the lord's generous

forgiveness
and the crowd might turn on him.

Either way,
the steward goes from hated
to hero.
When he retires the farmers will gladly take him in,
if the landowner won't.

And now we come to the question.
So what does it all mean?

Most people get stuck on the moral issues.
What the steward does is clearly dishonest.
He's guilty of all charges,
 taking the landlord's property and squandering it
even after he was fired, and therefore not authorized to do anything in the landowner's
name.

And Jesus says
we should act like him?
It makes no sense.

But what if we focus on what the steward actually does.
He forgives debts.
In a position where it seems he has no future,
he cannot be reconciled to either the landowner or the tenants,
he gets out of it
by forgiving.

He forgives things that he had no right to forgive.
He forgives for all the wrong reasons,
for personal gain
and to compensate for past misconduct.
The steward forgives.

It's one of the great themes of Luke.
We hear it in the Lord's Prayer, which in Luke's version has us say
not forgive us our sins, but forgive us our debts.
And of course, now the words Jesus says

at the end of this parable,
 you can't serve God and wealth
 make sense.

FORGIVE. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no
 reason at all. Even if it costs you.
 Just forgive.

Why forgive someone who's sinned against us, or against our sense of what is obviously
 right?

We don't have to do it out of love for the other person,
 if we're not there yet.

We forgive

because of that whole business of what we pray in Jesus' name every Sunday morning,
 and because we know we'd like forgiveness ourselves.

We forgive because we've experienced what we're like as unforgiving people,
 and so we know that refusing to forgive

because we don't want the other person to benefit is,
 as the saying goes,

like eating rat poison hoping it will hurt the rat.

We forgive because we are, or we want to be,

deeply in touch with a sense of Jesus' power to forgive and free sinners like us.

Or we could forgive because we think it will improve our odds of winning the lottery.

It boils down to the same thing:

deluded or sane, selfish unselfish,

there is no bad reason to forgive.

Extending the kind of grace God shows us in every possible arena -- financial and moral
 -- can only put us more deeply in touch with God's grace.

If the dishonest steward can forgive to save his job or give himself a safety net if his
 firing proves final,

then we

who have experienced the incredible grace of God,

who know what it's like

to have a God who doesn't keep score,

and who forgives us not seven times

but seventy times seven

and then again and again and again,

then we

can forgive.

Even when it makes no sense.

We can forgive.

Because it's the only way, the only way

to experience

the full blessing

of the life God has given us,

it's the only way

to find the freedom

that God promises us,

so that we can do the true work

God has given us to do, to love and serve Him,

with gladness and singleness of heart, through Christ our Lord.

Amen.