

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 and Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

At first glance, Jesus is not making a whole lot of sense in our Gospel reading for today when He tells the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. Clergy, lay people, seminary professors, and commentators have been scratching their heads over this Parable for generations, trying to figure out what in the world He was talking about. They all agree that the Lord works in mysterious ways.

Let's review the facts as we know them. We start with two characters: the rich man and his manager. The manager has been dishonest and the rich man summons him to his office to dismiss him. The manager realizes he's not trained for any other type of job, so, going to his master's clients, he reduces their bills, thereby earning himself their gratitude, and restoring his master's reputation from someone who employs corrupt officials, to someone who is generous with his clients.

The parable is not too difficult to follow up to this point. The manager is trying to make the best of a bad situation, and makes himself look good by dishonestly reducing the amount of money the clients owe.

Jesus said that the "master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may

welcome you into the eternal homes.”

What? Jesus’ words are completely baffling. They just don’t seem to match the type of behavior He usually asks us to display. There’s nothing in the Sermon on the Mount like, “Blessed are the shrewd, for they shall make eternal homes by means of dishonest wealth.”

Well, don’t panic, with this parable there is hope. First of all, remember that parables are meant to be confusing. They are meant to turn conventional wisdom on its head, leave listeners scratching their heads and praying for guidance.

But Jesus does not leave us totally without resources. He hands us stories like this and says, “Trust what you know of me and figure this out.”

So, what exactly is it that the manager does that is unethical or wrong? He forgives the clients’ debts. That sort of rings a bell, doesn’t it? Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. This parable is about forgiveness! But, this still doesn’t make sense. If Jesus wanted to talk about forgiveness, why didn’t He just say, “There was this guy who had a lot of people owing him money. He could have demanded that they pay in full, but he said, OK, you guys don’t have to pay, and everyone lived happily ever after.”

Well, once again, we stumble over the nature of our God who doesn’t let us get away with easy answers. And why not?

Because our lives don’t have any easy answers.

Jesus doesn’t tell simple stories because none of us live simple stories. Jesus knows that our lives are not black and white, and He also knows that we need guidance to live out our Christian lives. And so He gives us the gift of forgiveness. He offers His forgiveness openly, freely and without restraint. There is nothing we can ever do that will take God’s love away from us.

There is no way we will ever be anything less than God's most cherished children, no matter how many mistakes we make, or people we hurt. We are forgiven before we know we are going to do wrong, because Jesus loved us even unto death.

And knowing that forgiveness is ours for the asking at every step of the way, how can we not want to try it out ourselves?

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

That's what happens in this parable. The dishonest manager is forgiven even as he forgives others. And this is the best part: It's not neat and tidy and clean cut. There are still loose ends and ethical questions and uncertainty.

Because once again, Jesus knows that this is what our lives are like. We are not God, and we cannot offer one another perfect love. We are human, and we are always going to have mixed motives, and screw things up, even when we're trying to do the right thing; in part, we really want to have integrity, and in part, we just want everyone to see us as having integrity.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves, and in this parable, He tells us that it's OK to have mixed motives and make mistakes. What's important is that we keep trying. If we waited to forgive each other until we had perfect charity in our hearts, we'd be here until the end of the world. Jesus is saying, just do it. Forgive everyone. Forgive people even if you know they're wrong. Forgive people when you know you're wrong.

Forgive people when you don't feel like it, when they aren't talking to you, when you aren't talking to them, when you don't have time. Forgive people you've never met, forgive atrocities so big you are afraid to forgive them, forgive faults so small you are ashamed that they bother you. Forgive even if you've done it a thousand times; forgive even if you've never forgiven before.

Seriously, right now, where you're sitting, think of someone who is just making you furious. It could be your child who is "throwing his or her life away." It could be your spouse who never remembers to take the garbage out; it could be the sibling who hurt and betrayed you so badly you haven't spoken in years. Just do it and say to that person in your mind, "I forgive you."

It doesn't matter if you don't feel anything. You might feel an overwhelming rush of love and grace, or you might still feel cranky and self-righteous and just plain mad. It doesn't matter. You've taken the first step. Whatever else is in your heart right now - anger, fear, disappointment - there is also a little seed of forgiveness that has sprouted. And one day, if you keep practicing, you're going to find that forgiveness in your heart has grown so great that you can start to forgive yourself. And that will be a day of great rejoicing in the Kingdom of God.

AMEN.