

Lectionary 25C Pr 20
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
September 18, 2022

Jer 8
Psalm 79:1-7
I Tim 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

You may not have noticed, but there were lots of preacher folks walking around this week scratching their heads. You see, this Gospel reading is confounding. It is confusing. One commentary calls this “The Hardest Parable.”

We’ve spoken before about parables – how we need to be careful about a tidy explanation. And in this case, that isn’t really a concern because this parable is not susceptible to a “tidy explanation.” So, I got out my kaleidoscope and turned it a bit and, darn, if it didn’t fall apart and all that was left were pieces of glass on my desk.

But then I came upon a retelling of this parable by Professor Sarah Dylan Breuer. It isn’t a translation, and it barely is a paraphrase. But it did help me think about this and maybe pick up one of those pieces of glass.

There was a very rich man who lived a very luxurious lifestyle in a big city. He had a countryside estate and farm that produced income for him to enjoy this lifestyle. The landowner hired a manager to well, manage the farm while he partied in the city. All of the work on the farm was done by peasants – planting, tending, harvesting and all the tasks attendant thereto. These peasants grew up on the farm, their parents and grandparents having lived the same life. They were sharecroppers.

After they had paid exorbitant rent to the landowner, they bought the stuff needed for everyday lives from the company store with whatever is left over. The harvest was never quite enough to pay the rent plus what the family needs, so the family is slipping further and further into debt, working harder and harder to pay what can’t be paid.

They seldom saw the landowner but often saw the manager. He had been one of them but somehow managed to learn enough to be able to keep records and books for the landowner. And along the way he lost the backbone needed to refuse to participate in something so clearly unjust.

The time came when the landowner heard rumors that the manager was squandering the proceeds from the farm and, while he was still in the city, he fired the manager who then wondered what he would do in this quandry without a job or an income.

He was no longer authorized to do anything at all in the landowner’s name. The peasant farmers wouldn’t take him in, given that up until now he was the representative of the landowner and collected the sky high rent, running the company store, and generally dealing unjustly with the farmers.

So the manager does something extraordinarily clever and shrewd. He gathers all of the farmers who owe him money, and he declares that their debts have been reduced from the rough equivalent of "a million bazillion kajillion dollars" to something that maybe could be repaid. With a few subtle strokes of the pen, the indebtedness is forgiven.

Now, the manager doesn't tell the farmers that he was fired any more than he tells them that the landowner didn't authorize any of this generosity. The result is that the farmers believe the landowner is more generous than just about anyone else in his position would be. The landowner is now a hero in the farmers' eyes – and, by extension, the manager is also.

The landowner comes for his customary visit to pick up the wealth the manager was to have collected for him, and he gets a surprise that is both exhilarating and challenging:

For miles before he reaches the estate, the streets are lined by cheering farmers. They're shouting his name, telling him he's a hero. Then he finds out what the manager has done in telling the farmers that the landowner forgave their debts. Now he has a choice to make.

The landowner 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 manager's generosity was an act of crookedness and won't hold water legally. The cheering will turn to boos.

Or, the landowner can go outside and take in the cheering of the crowd. He can take credit for the manager's actions, in which case he'll continue to take in the acclaim of the farmers, but he'll have to take the manager back. Either way, the manager goes from scab and scumbag to hero. When he retires, the farmers will gladly take him in.

What can we glean from this story. Three things occurred to me. We know that people are more important than stuff. We know that God forgives the debts of a sinner. And we know that we are called to be stewards or managers of God's abundance.

First of all, our stuff. All of us enjoy having nice things. I happen to enjoy kicking back in my recliner and pulling a book from the shelf for a good afternoon read. Things aren't necessarily bad. But when my relationship with my stuff gets in the way of my relationship with people – when the book or the smartphone I'm holding gets more attention than to the people sitting next to me – something is wrong. Whatever the motives of the manager, he understood that his relationships with people were more important than money – that no matter how much stuff we have, it can be gone in an instant. But when we invest our time, our energy, and yes, even our money into helping our neighbor, we are investing in relationships that last far longer than any of the stuff we have.

This brings us to the second thing we know: God forgives our sins. Regardless of the manager's relationship with the rich man, he forgives the debts of all peasants who farmed the land. In fact, you might think of him as a Christ figure in this parable.

Now, we're told that he was caught stealing from his boss. But Christ was also considered a criminal for his so-called crimes; he was crucified between two other criminals. And yet by his

sacrifice we have been given new life. I wonder, is it possible that we might give new life and new opportunities to others by sharing what we have – by giving of “ourselves, our time and our possessions” to the mission of Jesus Christ in the world?

The third thing we know about this story is that not only are we the debtors who have been forgiven much, we also are the stewards or managers, of God’s good kingdom or realm. Nothing we have belongs to us; our health, our jobs, our homes and our families, What do we have that we did not receive? Think about it – our education? Taxpayer dollars at work. Our home that we worked hard to pay for? Paid for by our salary that we have because of the training and skill we have learned – education – from others. The new furniture in the living room? Came to us through the hands of hundreds who designed it, built it, packaged and shipped it and delivered it. Our health? Due to good habits? Perhaps – but how do we know about those habits being healthful? Doctors, nurses, scientists – all trained and sharing their expertise with us.

Yes, we are the grateful recipients of God’s creating and generous abundance, and we are called to use these gifts for the benefit of all in God’s kingdom.

So, my friends, with all of this said, please go back into the story and take the place of a peasant family. A family deeply in debt, a debt that can never be paid. Feel the weight lifted from shoulders rounded with burden. Feel the joy and indeed the glee at the prospect of a whole new life ahead. A life lived in community with others who feel the same joy and glee. A life lived freed in love. We are those peasants, aren’t we. We live together in a community of mutual love because we have been redeemed, redeemed to love and serve others. This community is a sanctuary for those of us who need it most.

May it be so. Amen.