
An Economy of Forgiveness

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The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 20C

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?' He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?' He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his 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. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Luke 16: 1-13

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all. Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this 18th Sunday after Pentecost, a day on which we hear a challenging, even confusing Gospel text. One of my favorite professors once said that if you're interested in the parables, if you'll engage them on a path of discovery and with a sense of wonder, you can learn from them. But you have to work for it. It can be *harrowing* in both the culturally familiar sense of the term "to vex and cause distress, and in the agricultural sense of harrowing the soil, which prepares it for new growth, and eventual harvest. This morning's Gospel certainly qualifies. It's puzzling, enigmatic, almost embarrassing. Jesus concludes the parable by having the honest master commend the manager for his dishonesty. And we are left to wonder if he meant what he said to be a metaphor, as is usually the case with parables, and if so, to what end? We are tempted to conclude the parable by scratching our heads and moving on to the next one, and maybe wishing, as my students did this past week, that lectionary had not skipped the story of the Prodigal Son. We'll have to work for this one to yield any meaning to us.

When I really lean into this text, it seems to me the puzzle hinges on the extraordinary bet the dishonest manager is willing to make on his master's character. Will the master enjoy his reputation for generosity more than he will enjoy his money?

Of course, the answer is yes.

So, in this passage we find a rich man whose lifestyle is made possible by the income from his estate in the country "an estate run by tenant farmers. The farmers buy what they need from the company store with whatever is left after the

exorbitant rent is paid to the landowner. The harvest is never enough to pay rent, and to purchase what the families need. The tenant farmers slip deeper into debt, working harder to pay what cannot be paid. The steward whom the owner has hired is a notch above the peasant farmers. He has just enough education to keep records, and to lose the moral heft needed to refuse participation in such an unjust system. The landowner fires the steward because of rumors that the steward is squandering the landowners' resources. The steward is no longer authorized to do anything in the landowner's name. The farmers aren't likely to take him in, since he has used his position of authority to deal unjustly with them; to perpetuate an economic system guaranteed to keep them in poverty.

So, he does something very clever—he gathers them all together and tells them that their debts have been reduced. Indeed, they have been reduced so much that the farmers can see some possibility of hope begin to emerge. Maybe they can repay their debts, begin to make some choices, buy a little seed crop, or even purchase a herd of their own. The steward doesn't tell the farmers that he was fired, nor that he did all of this without the blessing of the landowner. Thus, both the landowner and the steward are now heroes. We can use our imaginations here. Some suggest the dishonest manager makes friends by eliminating his own commission on the accounts, but truth told his cut seems far too high for this to be the case. Rather, he implicates his master's debtors in his personal subterfuge, meaning the master would have to prosecute his primary debtors and not just his manager, all while his customers are out in the city gate praising him for his extraordinary generosity. The landowner comes out to the country to pick up the wealth the steward has collected, and to give the wily steward his walking papers. We imagine that the streets are lined by cheering farmers, shouting his name, telling him that he's their benevolent hero. He finds out what the steward has done and now, of course, he has a choice to make. He can tell the farmers that this is all a terrible mistake. Or, he can go outside and soak in the acclaim, goodwill, and joy. Moreover, of course, he'll have to take the steward back. And when the steward retires, the farmers will gladly take him in—even if the landowner does not. He's gone from outcast to hero. All is well. All that is, except for one thing: what the steward does is clearly dishonest. He is guilty of all charges—taking the landowner's property and squandering it—even after he had been summarily dismissed. He was authorized to do nothing, yet he did much. How do we reconcile this behavior? One might be tempted to praise the steward for acting decisively in the face of a crisis. But one wonders. How can this parable be understood theologically in some way that reconciles us to this steward?

Someone once said that there are two kinds of parables; one is the "Go Thou and do likewise" type of parable, and the second is the "How much more" type. This parable is *not* a "Go Thou and do likewise" kind of parable. This is a "How much more" parable. That is to say, if a dishonest manager can ensure his future with shrewdness, "how much more" should we Christians behave shrewdly in advancing the cause of the Kingdom? If in the business world cleverness and risk taking are recipes for success, how much more should those committed to the church be creative and willing to take risks in their participation in the kingdom of God? Money is a good servant, but a very poor master.

I once heard an executive with a church related organization say that he didn't care where the money people gave to the organization came from, or how it was procured. He believed the mission of the organization would put it to good use—redeem it, if you will.

And here we come to what may be the *theological heart* of this story. *The unjust steward forgives*. He forgives things he has no right to forgive. He forgives for all the wrong reasons: for personal gain and to compensate for past misbehavior. But this is the message in this strange parable: go ahead, forgive it all, forgive it now, and forgive for good and for selfish reasons, or for no reason whatsoever. Why forgive someone who has sinned against us or against our sense of what is right? We could forgive out of love, or in Jesus' name, or because we have been forgiven, or because we want to be free of the burden of bitterness, or because we think it will improve our chances of winning the lottery. There is no bad reason to forgive, dear ones. It puts us in touch with God's abundant grace. And if a guy who was a rascal and a dishonest scallywag can forgive to save his job or give himself a safety net if his firing proves unavoidable, then we who have experienced real grace have *all the more reason* to forgive. "How much more?" indeed.

Last year I read a wonderful book by Laura Hillenbrand, titled *Unbroken*, about the life of Olympic runner Louis Zamperini. He was the son of Italian immigrants and Louis spoke no English when his family moved to California. A young man with behavior problems, his older brother Pete got him involved in the school track team as a way to divert and focus his energy into something productive, and generative, and life-giving. Running has a way of doing that. It worked. His energies thus channeled, in 1934 Zamperini set a world interscholastic record for the mile, clocking in at 4:21.2 at the preliminary meet to the state championships. The following week he won the championships with a 04:27 mile, and that

record helped him win a scholarship to the University of Southern California and eventually a place on the 1936 U.S. Olympic team in the 5000 meters, at 19 the youngest U.S. qualifier in that event. Zamperini finished eighth in the 5000 meters at that Olympics. Two years later, in 1938, he set a national collegiate mile record which held for fifteen years, earning him the nickname "Torrance Tornado". He enlisted in the United States Army Air Force in September 1941 and earned a commission as a second lieutenant the following August. He was deployed to the Pacific island of Funafuti as a bombardier assigned to a B-24 Liberator. On May 27, 1943, he and his crew were assigned to conduct a search for a lost aircraft and its crew. While on the search, mechanical difficulties caused the plane to crash into the ocean 850 miles west of Oahu, killing eight of the eleven men aboard.

The three survivors, with little food and no water, subsisted on captured rainwater and small fish. On their 47th day adrift, Zamperini and Phillips reached land in the Marshall Islands and were immediately captured by the Japanese Navy. Both Phillips and Zamperini were held in captivity and severely beaten and mistreated until the end of the war in August 1945. Because he was a famous Olympian, he was especially tormented by sadistic prison guard Mutsuhiro Watanabe (nicknamed "The Bird"), who was later included in General Douglas MacArthur's list of the 40 most wanted war criminals in Japan. Zamperini had at first been declared missing at sea, and then, a year and a day after his disappearance, killed in action. When he eventually returned home he received a hero's welcome. In 1946 he married Cynthia Applewhite. After the war he suffered from what we would now call severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Clinically depressed, and drinking too much, he was on the edge of destroying his marriage, and his life. Seems that at precisely this moment, a young evangelist by the name of Billy Graham was preaching in LA, and Cynthia attended the first two nights of the revival, praying for her husband. She begged him to go hear Graham on his final night in town. He did not. Mysteriously, Graham added a fourth night. And that night, after hearing Graham, Louis Zamperini turned his life around, got help, and quit drinking. Graham later helped Zamperini launch a new career as a speaker, and he helped Louis and Cynthia open a ranch for kids in trouble, which they ran for many years. In an Olympic related interview I saw last year, the interviewer asked Zamperini how he had turned his life around, and what kept him from giving up. He said one word stood out that night at the revival: "*forgiveness*." Over the years he visited many of the guards from his POW days to let them know that he has forgiven them. In October 1950, Zamperini went to Japan, gave his testimony and preached. The colonel in charge of the prison encouraged any of the prisoners who recognized Zamperini to come forward and meet him again. Zamperini threw his arms around each of them. Once again he explained the Gospel of forgiveness to them. "*You can spend your life swallowing hatred and bitterness, and it will kill you,*" he said. "*I chose the Bread of Christ. I chose forgiveness, and it has given me life.*" And that, my sisters and brothers, is a "*go and do likewise*" parable. The poet William Butler Yeats once said: *When such as I cast out remorse, So great a sweetness flows into the breast, We must laugh and we must sing, We are blest by everything, Everything we look upon is blest.*¹ Amen.

¹William Butler Yeats, "Dialogue of Self and Soul," *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*, New York: Scribner (1983)