

The Rev. James S. Ward

Whenever Jesus tells stories like the one we just heard, it's important to pay attention to the intended audience. Luke tells us before the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin we talked about last week and that of the Lost Son that immediately follows them, that these are told to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling because tax-collectors and sinners were coming to hear Jesus teach.

The familiar story known as the Prodigal Son makes the importance of the audience very clear. The gracious, forgiving father, who the younger son treats as if dead in asking for his share of the inheritance at the beginning of the story, is a stand-in for God in the story. The prodigal who goes off into a far country and squanders all that his father has worked so hard to provide for him is like the sinners who scorn the filial piety of the righteous Pharisees. The older brother who plays it safe and never gets out of line with the father until the no-good younger brother returns home and is welcomed by the father with open arms, takes up the part of the Pharisees and scribes for whose benefit the story is told. The parable's trap is set for them. Will they accept joyfully the repentance of the sinners as God has done, and join them at the party, “eating and celebrating.”

So that parable is not only about the forgiveness of God like the previous two, but it calls for forgiveness from the older brother. [Forgiveness gives life, the life that is the experience of the those who follow Jesus. The father in the parable is regarded as dead by the younger son and the prodigal himself is as good as dead, lost in the far-off country where he is reduced to the unclean status of an pig. But the father's welcome quickens the old man himself, as he runs down the dusty road to meet the returning boy. His lavish embrace resurrects the boy and returns him to his place in the family.] Now the question is will the older son follow suit? Will he release his judgment on his younger brother and enter the party? We're not told. The parable of the prodigal ends without an ending. It's up to the good religious people listening from the perspective of the older brother to supply the ending. Quickening their own lives with the new life of the Spirit of the loving and forgiving God, will they let go of their own social advantage by joining Jesus in welcoming to the table the sinners who have been excluded?

If that story is for the benefit of the sinners and tax-collectors on the one hand and the Pharisees and scribes on the other, the next one we're told is for the benefit of the disciples themselves, those who are struggling to follow. “Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich

man who had a manager. “ But even so, the narrator notes at the end that “The pharisees heard all this, and they ridiculed him.” And it’s easy to see why they would. How can the dishonest behavior of this manager ever be justified? And yet the rich owner commends him! You can feel the disciples squirming. Or maybe because being here today so qualifies you as a disciple that you’re squirming. Isn’t this a scandal to the disciples? Even the commentary in the text that follows the story itself betrays the anxiety of the Church who preserved this story. Whether it is in the original collector of sayings of Jesus to which the author of the Gospel had access, or editorial hand of the author himself, or some early copier of the text who couldn’t allow it to stand without some sort of explanation; the collection of sayings that comes after the story itself is desperate to come up with an acceptable interpretation or understanding of this appallingly amoral story.

All of these sayings attributed to Jesus are attempts to moralize the story, to make it more palatable to those surrounding the early Christians who were already likely enough to be scandalized by Jesus without such scandalous stories being attributed to him. But it should be noted that two millennia later scholars and theologians are convinced that this is an authentic parable of Jesus precisely because it is so scandalous and so clearly is an embarrassment to the early church that it has to try to mollify it by tacking-on these confusing aphorisms to throw us off the obvious meaning.

So let’s take a moment to hear the story itself and disregard the interpretive comments that taken together seem to be saying, “Jesus can’t have meant that, so he must have meant something like this.” But before we do there are some things I want to urge you to listen for. First notice how this story is like the story of the Prodigal. Both the prodigal son and the dishonest manager squander another’s property. Both, upon discovering themselves to be “as good as dead,” come up with a scheme to help them survive. And both are more lavishly embraced with grace and mercy by those they sinned against than they could ever have imagined. The two belong together; they are both about forgiveness and grace. Now listen to the story:

‘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 account 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;'

The master like the father in the Prodigal story holds the place of God. The steward or manager is someone who has a special responsibility to the rich man his master. He is not simply a debtor, but a fiduciary, whose accountability to the master involves him carrying out his master's purposes. He is thus like a disciple. And a disciple has a privileged place in the matter of understanding the parables of Jesus. While Luke's Jesus doesn't make as much of this as do Matthew and Mark he nevertheless says some chapters earlier: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables." So as disciples of Jesus we should see ourselves as the ones to whom this story is directed. The Prodigal was for "sinners" (younger brothers) and "Pharisees" (older brothers), but this one is for us. This is to say, it is our baptismal ministry, the responsibility of our discipleship, that makes us capable of understanding what Jesus is trying to impart.

So let me get right to it. Fraud and embezzlement are things that Christians are familiar and guilty of from our own experience. We presume on God's grace and take his forgiveness for granted. We steal from God by withholding our tithes, or by holding grudges, or by judging those who are less fortunate, or by our uncharitable thoughts toward our coworkers or family. And yet we know better. We treat God's gifts as if they were our own possessions, think of ourselves as owners rather than managers. We might well be accused of the kind of crime that the manager in the story is! Moreover, we bring dishonor on God by our mismanagement. Like the disciples in the Gospels we are block-headed and stiff-necked, more concerned about our own comforts or our own fears than about the promise and reign of God. We squander God's grace by our petty squabbles and our condemnation of one another. The management will surely be taken away from us!

But we have grown too accustomed to the dignity of the children of God and we are entirely too much aware of our weaknesses to bluff our cajole our way through life. What can we do? Well, if we're going to impersonate the Rich Man to whom we owe everything anyway we may as well use the perquisites of his employ to bless all those who find themselves in his debt. Perhaps they will come into our debt. I was at San Quentin the other night for a meeting of the men of Kairos the Cursillo prison ministry. The theme of our gathering was "forgiveness." Now forgiveness is something with which prisoners are very well acquainted indeed. Virtually all of them come from backgrounds where they were victims of physical or sexual abuse. They have been betrayed by family members, friends, wives and girlfriends. They are also wrestling with seeking the forgiveness of those they have harmed, the victims of their crimes. Their eventual

freedom depends on this work. Now love is the fruit of forgiveness. The motto of Kairos is “Listen, Listen, Love, Love.” All of us have places in our life where we can exercise love and forgiveness. Where we can cut another some slack, or lovingly tell another person the truth of God’s love for them that they need to hear.

What is amazing about this parable is not that the manager is dishonest. All of us are familiar with that tendency either in ourselves or in others. Nor is it that the clever manager figured out that if he discounted the notes of his masters debtors they would be so grateful and beholden to him, that they might even offer him a management job in their firm—we’re all familiar with that approach to hiring. What is truly amazing is that instead of firing him as he originally intended to do, the master promotes him. He holds him up as a creative employee, someone to be emulated by others. The original hearers of this parable had to be not only surprised but thrown into confusion by this ending. For them as peasant followers of Jesus it was a truism that rich owners were cruel, harsh and unscrupulous. They would have cheered the manager’s clever ploy to get even with the master. Then all of a sudden the master rather than condemning him commends the servant. He shows him mercy even though clearly calling what he has done dishonest.

The rich man now imitates his servant manager’s generosity to his debtors. He forgives him. He has repented based upon the gracious merciful behavior of his manager, and sees it as a boon to his own reputation to do so. Rather than making it a standard of retribution he has made justice equal to vulnerability and healing, and outdone the manager in showing mercy. The parable calls on us, the disciples of Jesus, to outgrow a religion of fear based on a strict judge and legalistic justice, based on a God who is an accountant, keeping score of our sins and offenses, in favor of a God of grace and mercy who in forgiving us changes us into his likeness. Or perhaps it is us who are changing God. Maybe we get the God we are ready for. If we exact strict justice and punishment, perhaps we get in God an exacting Judge. But if we minister forgiveness to others we get a God who comes to us as forgiveness as well. If we are vulnerable, we will be embraced by a vulnerable God. Isn’t that what Jesus means when he says, “with the measure you give it will be given you,” and “If you forgive those who sin against you, God will forgive you your sins.” For if we incarnate the God of justice, then we have little hope; but if we incarnate the God of mercy, grace and forgiveness, the world has hope through us.