

“Faithful in Much”

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Luke 16: 1-13

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This is a difficult parable before us now. Most weeks I glance through commentaries and if I'm stuck I dip into the thoughts of other preachers to see if something might spark my imagination. Some preachers decided t some issues inn this parable are insoluble. . this week? Everywhere I look, everyone agrees that this one is tough. This story Jesus tells just won't let go of me. Even if I don't understand exactly why he tells it.... And so I read it and I read it again and I keep trying to find a parallel somewhere in my life experience.

Sarah Dylan Breuer retells this difficult parable in a way that I hope helps us better understand it in one way.

“A very, very rich man lives in a big city (like Jerusalem), with a lifestyle of luxury made possible from the income of the estate he owns in the countryside. He's hired a manager (steward) to run it while he parties in Jerusalem, and all of the work of planting and harvesting is done by peasants whose grandparents might 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 prices far above what their grandparents paid for the same goods), with whatever is left over after the exorbitant rent is paid to the landowner. The harvest is 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. The immediate face of this system is that of the manager -- someone who might have come from the same families as the people who now suffer under his management, but who managed somehow to get the education needed to keep records and to lose the backbone needed to refuse to participate in something so clearly unjust.

The landowner fires the steward because of rumors that the steward was squandering the landowner's resources (and "squandering" isn't necessarily a bad word here -- the sower in another of Jesus' parables squanders seed by tossing it on roads and in bird-feeding zones, and the shepherd in last week's parable potentially squanders the ninety-nine by running after one lost sheep). So the steward is no longer authorized to do anything at all in the master's name. The farmers from whom he probably came aren't about to take him in either, given that up until 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. That's why the steward is called "the steward of unrighteousness" in verse 8."

So what does the steward do? Something extraordinarily clever. 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 dollars" to something that maybe could be repaid, (maybe) freeing the family to make choices about next steps. With quirks of how records were kept, this involves a few subtle strokes of the (forger's) pen -- much like what students do in changing a handwritten 'D' to a 'B' on a report card.

The steward 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 the steward is also, by extension.

The landowner comes for his customary visit to pick up the wealth the steward has collected for him, and he gets a surprise that is both exhilarating and challenging: The streets for miles before he reaches the estate are lined by cheering farmers. They're shouting his name, telling him he's a hero.

He finds out when he arrives at the estate house what the steward 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 steward's generosity was an act of crookedness. The cheering will turn to boos, and I wouldn't want to be the landowner then.

Alternatively, the landowner can go outside and take in the cheering of the crowd. He can take credit for the steward's actions, in which case he'll continue to take in the acclaim of the farmers who are honoring him, but he'll have to take the steward back. Mistreat the steward, who brought such good news of the lord's generous forgiveness the crowd might turn on him. I don't doubt what a sane person in the landowner's situation would do in such circumstances, but either way, the steward goes from scab and scumbag to hero. When he retires, the farmers will gladly take him in, if the landowner won't. ”¹

¹ September 13, 2004 in [Best of 2004](#), [Forgiveness](#), [Luke](#), [Ordinary Time](#), [Parables](#), [Year C](#) | [Permalink](#)

Most folks see the steward as clearly dishonest. From a capitalist perspective, 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. "The steward is faced with a crisis, and he acts decisively. Jesus is saying that the in breaking of the kingdom of God calls upon us all to act decisively." What the steward does is forgives debts. 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. But that's the decisive action that he undertakes to redeem himself from a position from which it seem he couldn't be reconciled, to the landowner any more than to the farmers.

The emphatic moral for the gospel writer of Luke is forgiveness. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no reason at all. Luke's version of the "Lord's Prayer" includes: "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (Luke 11:4) To quote Nike, "Just do it!"

Why forgive someone who's sinned against us, or against our sense of what is obviously right? We could forgive the other person because that pray we offer in Jesus' name every Sunday morning, and because we know we'd like forgiveness ourselves. We could forgive because we've experienced what we're like as unforgiving people. We could 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. There is no bad reason to forgive. Extending the kind of grace God shows us in every arena -- financial and moral -- can only put us more deeply in touch with God's grace.

We who believe that "the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it" (Psalm 24:1), and therefore forgiving debts is simply telling someone else that scorekeeping is up to the only one to whom anything of value belongs -- have better reason to forgive. Money and possessions are not wrong in themselves - they can allow us to show love and generosity. Where that is the case, we are managers of them - we possess them, they do not possess us. We are called to be faithful in much because we've got more important things to act upon than scorekeeping: the work God has given us to do, to love and serve God, with gladness through Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God!
