

**The Rev'd Margaret Rodrigues
Homily – September 18, 2022**

**The Unjust Steward
(Luke 16.1-13)**

I offer these words to you and to God. Amen.

This morning we just heard Jesus telling a very puzzling parable about the unjust steward. It only appears in its entirety in Luke's Gospel, except for the ending, which is also in Matthew, suggesting that perhaps it might have come from the lost Gospel of Q. It is apparently one of the most contentious parables in scripture which will hopefully make it very interesting to think about this morning!

Jesus was a Galilean rabbi who spent almost three years of his life travelling round the Galilee helping and supporting the generally poverty-stricken local village populations who were being exploited not only by the Roman occupiers but also by the Jewish authorities who were cooperating with the Romans. Sometimes the local villagers were so desperate, so poor, so homeless and hungry, that they resorted to exploiting each other in desperation.

As we know, Jesus told many parables to get the most ordinary people to think, reflect and to discuss issues among themselves. Perhaps this was a precursor to the long-established Jewish technique of Midrash used in Judaism to this day. Midrash has involved a free give-and-take as part of Talmudic studies that focuses on a specific Talmudic text. All present, will participate in an effort to exhaust the meaning and ramifications of the text, debating and arguing together. The mention of a name, situation, or idea often leads to the introduction of a story or legend that can lighten the mood of a complex argument and carries the discussion further.

So, can we see Jesus using a very early version of this approach in discussing and analyzing passages of the Jewish scriptures of his time, including the Torah, I wonder? Sometimes he seems to have invented/created situations that were of special concern to his listeners like the story this morning of the dishonest steward who was exploiting those he supervised. Sadly, we don't have a record of Jesus' many discussions themselves, but they must have been fascinating to the groups of ordinary people who sat around him. He was also a huge threat to the local Pharisees who were committed to the official interpretations of scripture.

As an aside, does this remind you of certain parts of the church, perhaps? Although much of the church has started to change, Christianity itself has been prone to promoting official versions of Biblical interpretations. But I suggest that it isn't possible to do it with this particular text, which has been described as the most debated parable of all.

So, what was Jesus getting at in this particularly confusing situation? If we were doing Midrash, we could perhaps take it in several ways:

The First Nations version of the New Testament treats it very gently: If Creator cannot trust you with the possessions of this world, then how will he trust you with the treasures of the spirit-world above? But if you do well with the small things of this world, you will do well with the great things of the spirit-world above. (Luke 16.10-12).

Alternatively, what worries people the most is whether Jesus himself actually could be commending the dishonest steward for his shrewdness in manipulating the tenants by reducing their payments so that they felt under an obligation to the steward for saving them, and then welcomed him into their homes in a kind of perverse gratitude. These desperate, powerless people knew that whatever they did they would be hopelessly vulnerable anyway.

Some people have suggested that perhaps the steward improved the economic situation of the landowner/manager by eliminating skimming before he passed on the balance of the revenues to his boss, thereby ensuring that the tenants were able to survive at all.

I prefer a much more tough-minded interpretation. I think Jesus was scornful of the dishonesty and manipulation of the steward. Based on the ill-treatment he saw happening around him all the time, he recognized that dishonest people are very often much shrewder at getting their own way than what he called “The People of Light.” Jesus tells his listeners that instead of falling into this trap, make friends by means of honest wealth (if they have it) which would have eternal benefits for others, not just in this world. Jesus is telling people not to fall for manipulation, but always to put God first.

The parable ends in both Luke and Matthew with Jesus wisely saying “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon (wealth/money).” In the subsequent passage from Luke’s Gospel, we then hear the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, hearing all this and predictably scoffing at Jesus. But he says to the “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts, because what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

Human history is full of examples of people who manipulate others in any way they can – just open the newspapers every morning. What examples can you think of, I wonder? Some that come to my mind include young people who are in desperate economic circumstances – e.g. a teenager with a single mother on welfare and hungry siblings will succumb to pressure every time and then can’t get out of the situation again. I was on the jury for the trial of a crack dealer at J/F and it was heartbreaking to learn about the 12-year-olds who ran drugs and money for dealers in and out of multi-storey car parks in North York.

We have elections coming up, so how do we distinguish between platforms that the candidates really believe in, or that will simply get them elected because the electorate is gullible? What are the candidates putting first?

On the positive side, this week there was the story of the incredibly rich Patagonia family clothing company that has decided to give their wealth of billions of dollars away to fight climate change.

The queen was a woman of enormous faith, integrity and principle who used her role for great good. But how will the royal family and the rest of the world cope without her magnificent example now that she is gone, I wonder?

Jesus is clear that there are some vital choices in our lives – e.g. between serving God first or putting money first. But because God has chosen to create us as free agents, we always have the option for new beginnings, a chance to rethink what we are doing and make fundamental choices and new starts even though it can be extremely difficult for us to do this in practice.

So, moving forward to today, how does this parable relate to our situation at Redeemer, I wonder? In our parish community we are continuing our season of new starts, including blessing our pilgrims who are going on the Camino. It is the second Sunday of our new experimental approach to Sunday services, and my first Sunday to preach and preside here for which I am extremely grateful.

I suggest that underlying almost everything that Jesus says is the message of unconditional love. So, I’m going to end with a poem about new beginnings and the fundamental importance of love in our lives from the 13th century Persian mystic poet Rumi of whom I’m very fond, as perhaps are many of you:

WHEN YOU PLANT A TREE

EVERY LEAF THAT GROWS WILL TELL YOU
WHAT YOU SOW WILL BEAR FRUIT.
SO IF YOU HAVE ANY SENSE, MY FRIEND
DON'T PLANT ANYTHING BUT LOVE,
YOU SHOW YOUR WORTH BY WHAT YOU SEEK.
WATER FLOWS TO THOSE WHO WANT PURITY
WASH YOUR HANDS OF ALL DESIRES
COME TO THE TABLE OF LOVE.

DO YOU WANT ME TO TELL YOU A SECRET?
THE FLOWERS ATTRACT THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LOVER
WITH THEIR SWEET SMILE AND SCENT.
IF YOU LET GOD WEAVE THE VERSE IN YOUR POEM
PEOPLE WILL READ IT FOR EVER.

Amen.