

Amos 8:4-7
Psalm 113
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

Every now and then, the good people who prepare the lectionary for us sneak in a zinger. The gospel lesson for today is just one of those occasions. To prepare for the sermon for this week, I read more than the customary 3-4 commentaries. I read 7-8 commentaries because every single one of them started out by saying something along the lines of “this gospel lesson is so hard to fathom that the prudent priest might decide to preach on the Old Testament lesson or the Epistle this week.” Even my clergy friends on Facebook were talking about it. One of them said that the next time his wife asks him to preach for her, he’s going to check the lectionary for the readings and get back to her. Another posted this from a commentary “This parable defies any fully satisfactory explanation.” My friend’s reply, “Challenge accepted.”

There seem to be as many guesses about what this passage means as there are commentaries on it. And to be quite honest the interpretations raise more questions than they provide answers. But my reaction was much like my friend, Fr. Curtis who accepted the challenge, so let’s have at it.

We need to look at the gospel as being in two different parts. The first part is the parable. It ends in the middle of verse 8 with the master commending the manager for being shrewd. The remaining verses are commentary or explanations or lessons that we need to learn from this story.

Here’s the Set-Up

Both the rich man and his dishonest manager are thriving in a corrupt system that exploits the poor who are working the land. The proportions of what the poor have to pay for the use of this land are outrageous. These guys are no better than modern day loan sharks who increase a debt beyond what is possible to pay. It is economic oppression at its worst. Add to that the fact that the occupying Roman officials will also extract money from the poor in taxes leaving them little if anything. This is first century Palestine and all of the Jewish community know that their covenant with God prohibits them from charging interest on loans which is basically what the

rich man and his manager are doing. They are operating outside the religious law, but then so are most of the people with power and influence. It is how the system has developed. The rich continue to accumulate wealth and the poor barely survive.

The prophet Amos in our Old Testament lesson this morning rails against just this sort of attitude of the people in power who tack advantage of poor people and focus only on what they can do by any means, legal or illegal, to get wealthier. Amos rails at these very people saying that the Lord will never forget any of their deeds. Now Amos was prophesying to the Israelites in the 700's BCE, so this system has been going on for at least 800 years.....probably more. It's a very entrenched system!

And this dishonest manager is only one person in a very large system just doing what everybody else is doing for as long as anyone can remember. But he's accused of squandering the rich man's property and he's going to lose his job.

The dishonest manager is floored.....and panicked.....and the first thing that comes to his mind is the first thing that would come to any of our minds if we just found out that we were going to lose our job. He was frantic to figure out how he was going to survive. Life as he knew it was over. He was dead. What would he do? His options were limited. He ruled out manual labor because he was too out-of-shape to do that and he was too ashamed to beg. Those seem to have been the only choices that came to his mind. Maybe they were the only choices he had. His life is over. He has nothing left to protect, so he begins to think outside the box.

Here's the Plan

This fellow was a manager for a reason. It seems he was pretty good at assessing a situation and figuring out what the possibilities were. He's still managing the rich man's affairs and his job is collecting from the people who owed his boss.

Now this dishonest manager is expedient if nothing else. He's got to figure out how he's going to survive when his boss lets him go. So here's the plan. He decides to tell each person who owes the landowner to reduce the bill. He may very well have simply been giving up his own commission. He tells each debtor how much to lower the bill. His thinking is that when he himself is out in the cold, these folks whose debts he has cancelled will feel so relieved and so beholden and indebted to him and they will take care of him. However, there is no guarantee. The relationships he is building then become more important to him than the wealth that he has been accumulating. BINGO

He did it because it was the most expedient way he could think of to ensure his own future and his own survival. He did it out of self-interest. But he **did** switch his priorities. He was forced into switching his priorities by circumstances beyond his control. But he leveled the playing field. He forgave all of these peasants their debts. He made things right for them. He restored some justice. And he inadvertently fell into line with following the covenant commandments between God and Israel regarding the use of money.

But is Jesus trying to tell us that the moral of the story is expediency and self-interest? Probably not. And if we focus on the flaws of the dishonest manager we may miss the point.

Here's the Outcome

He was only one person operating in a very large system and he knew how the system worked and he knew how people worked. And he changed how he did business. He let the debtors off the hook. He lifted their economic oppression. He was gracious with all the debtors. He did a good deed. He shifted his focus from the accumulation of wealth to the engendering of good will. He did a good deed.....perhaps for the wrong reasons.....but his neighbors benefitted regardless of his motive. Maybe he thought he was doing it to save his own skin, but he was also saving theirs. He was faithful with what belongs to another. He respected what they had and didn't take it from them even though he could have. And the reaction from the ones whose debt had been removed must have been similar to the reaction that we have when our debts have been cancelled.....relief and gratitude and undying affection for the one who cancelled the debt. Regardless of the original motive, what the dishonest manager did was an act of grace. It was the very essence of the kingdom of God coming near. In his desperation, the dishonest steward was raised from his dead life as a bill collector to a new life of grace. To quote theologian Robert Farrar Capon: "The point of the parable remains unchanged: grace works only on those it finds dead enough to raise."

This parable is similar to the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Remember that one? The master of the household forgives his servant his debt to him and hopes that the servant will follow his example and forgive the debts of the people who owe something to the servant, but the servant doesn't do that. It's a tale about trying to spread forgiveness from the top down and it didn't work. In the tale of the Dishonest Manager we have a tale of forgiveness reaching down to those in debt. Perhaps the rich man ended up commending the dishonest manager because he saw the reaction of those who had been debtors and he realized what a smart move this was on the part of his manager. He became forgiving in his attitude as well.

Does this remind you of anybody? Is there someone else who was only one man working for good in a system that was working against him? Only one man whose actions changed the course of humankind forever?

Didn't Jesus come expressly to cancel our debt? Wasn't that what he was anointed to do? But how can Jesus be the character of the dishonest manager who was hardly a respectable figure?

Robert Farrar Capon tells us: "The unique contribution of this parable to our understanding of Jesus is its insistence that grace cannot come to the world through respectability. Respectability regards only life, success, winning; it will have no truck with the grace that works by death and losing – which is the only kind of grace there is." We can be dispensers of grace to others only when we are willing to come from a position of losing and are willing to die to self. That's what Jesus taught us and showed us by his example.

We know Jesus to be One without sin, but was he respectable from a human point of view? In the world in which he lived and preached and taught and healed, he was not. He was a learned man, but he was also homeless with no visible means of support. He hung out with the fringe folk who were hardly respectable. They were the crooks and the shady characters and the prostitutes and the ones that nice, respectable people didn't want to be around. All of the respectable people said "No" to them, but Jesus said, "Yes." He even specifically called a tax collector to be one of his disciples. He didn't keep the Sabbath the way it was traditionally kept by the respectable people. And he died as a criminal.

Parables are designed to tell us something about the nature of God or to give us an example of how we are to behave. This particular parable tells in story form what Jesus said about his own life. Through this parable we are able to see why Jesus refused to be respectable. Robert Farrar Capon says that "he did it to catch a world that respectability could only terrify and condemn. He became one of us. He became sin for us sinners, weak for us weaklings, lost for us losers, and dead for us dead."

Every now and then we're given a lectionary reading that's a zinger. Those can turn out to be the very best kind containing some of the most important insights. With some perseverance, the help of clergy colleagues and some important nudges from the Holy Spirit, we can determine what God wants us to know through the Word he has given us.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.