

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PROPER 20
SUNDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2013
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Amos 8:4-7, Psalm 113, Luke 16:1-13

“Captives”

The parable in today’s gospel has a reputation for being one of the most difficult to interpret in the New Testament.

This week, on her sermon blog, one of my colleagues in the States, Sarah Dylan Bruer (http://www.sarahlaughed.net/sermons/2004/09/unjustly_forgiv.html) retold the story like this:

The immediate face of this system is that of the steward -- 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.

At the very beginning of the parable, 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 sheep by running after one lost sheep).

So, having been fired, the steward is no longer authorized to do anything at all in the master’s name. The farmers from whom the steward 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 kind of behavior is 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 the landowner money, and he tells them that their debts have been reduced from the rough equivalent of “a zillion 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, the steward’s creative accounting 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, or in a crooked accountant’s deletion of a zero or two from the records.

The farmers think that the steward is still acting with the master’s authority in all of this; 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, by extension, is also.

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.

One of his loyal servants at the estate house breaks the news to him that his ex-steward has told 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 (or unrighteousness, depending on your perspective) and won’t hold water legally. 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; – but remember that the steward was the bearer of that good news. If the landowner wants to keep the crowd’s favor, he’ll have to take the steward back. Mistreat the steward, who brought such good news of the lord’s generous forgiveness, and the crowd might turn on him.

That’s quite a bind the steward has put the landowner in. 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 the steward retires, the farmers who formerly resented him will gladly take him in, if the landowner won’t.

So we know why the steward does what he did, and we know why the landowner did what he did.

But, here’s the big problem, for most commentators:
Why is Jesus telling this story?

So far the retelling of the story is by Sarah Bruer.

Now let’s see if we can find a way to make some sense of this story.

I think the first mistake we might make is trying to figure out the “who is who” of this story and reading it as if it was a story with a straightforward easily applicable moral. Parables rarely are. More often than not the parables Jesus tells are stories with a twist, that challenge our preconceptions and prejudices. Jesus uses parables not to teach a straightforward lesson. More often than not he uses parables to make us think by offering a glimpse of an alternate reality, called the Kingdom of God, working on a very different set of values and realities than the society and world we live in does.

Who is the rich man? Is it God? Isn’t that how we often see God, as a landowner who wants to see a healthy return on the estate he has entrusted to us. Just before this story, in Luke’s gospel Jesus has told the story of the prodigal son and the generous, forgiving Father, a wealthy landowner with a very different character to the one pictured here. If that father was an image of God, how does this ruthless wealthy business man fit the bill?

So no, not God perhaps, but the devil, Mammon, the god of money and riches who instills fear and hunger for more in those who honour him with their allegiance, and encourages injustice and greed in all who follow him, keeping those who serve him captive by threats to their future security and independence. Exerting a power that is nigh impossible to resist.

Who then is the Steward? Is it Jesus? Appointed to look after the Father’s estate and squandering the capital by building community and supporting the poor in an abundance of forgiveness and grace? But does that mean we call Jesus dishonest? Buying friends? And didn’t we hear in the parable of the prodigal son just before this story how friends who have been acquired by money don’t last? Does the parable then portray Jesus dishonestly building shaky, shady friendships?

Or are we to recognise ourselves in the Steward and are we encouraged to take on the unjust and dishonest ways of the world to build God’s Kingdom? And how exactly? By squandering what? Acquit which debts?

Who are the debtors? Is it us? Deep in God's debt and dependent on the extravagant, paradoxical action of Jesus, who's been put in charge of God's inheritance for our salvation? That may square with the gospel of salvation by grace alone, at some level, but at other levels reading the story like this is highly problematic.

Rich people do not get a good rap in the gospel of Luke, as, for instance, in the story which immediately follows this one makes very clear. The chasm between the rich man and the poor Lazarus that opens up after the Kingdom's come is so large the rich man doesn't even stand a chance of getting into it. Likening God to a wealthy landowner is definitely not an image that fits in with Luke's perception of divine realities. Jesus in Luke's gospel is the one who sides with the poor, the outcast and the suffering at his own expense. Certainly not a steward who tries to save his own skin by offering others what is not his to give in the first place.

No this parable is hard, perhaps, as Luther said, the hardest of them all. It challenges, it confuses, and it leaves us with all kinds of questions.

Unless.... what if we start reading the parable from the end? Could that give us a clue as to what we are meant to see? The parable finishes with a couple of very decisive, very clear statements: "No slave can serve two masters" and "You cannot serve God and wealth".

Perhaps the Rich man is just that: A rich man, a symbol of a world, a reality, where money makes the man and wealth is assumed to be a source of happiness, freedom and comfort. Perhaps the dishonest Steward is just that: A middleman trying to make the most of his position by sucking up to those who are higher up than him and trampling those who aren't. A man who tries to make the best of things, but is forever living on the edge, between comfort and security of wealth and the abyss of ending up where he is desperately trying to keep others: in debt and dependent on his, and his master's good will.

Both start out serving wealth, the Mammon, both end up breaking their allegiance to it. In a desperate attempt to save his own skin the steward breaks with the system that originally gave him power and security and uses its power to find another kind of security through building community and friendships. The wealthy landowner, in the mean time is forced by the steward, to also break with the system that has supported his wealth. The values of honour and status that are part of the system are turned against him. And he ends up reinstating the steward who has squandered his fortunes to an even larger degree than before.

Jesus has done it again! The world is turned upside down in this parable. The poor are raised from the dust, the needy from the ash heap, the security of the rich has come under threat, and those who hold others captive in a strangle hold of suffering and debt are forced out of their comfort to find themselves on the other side of the divide. Those who trample the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land tremble and sink like Egypt under the waters of the Nile.

And somehow, as a result, the Kingdom emerges, community is built, sins forgiven, unexpected and extravagant generosity turning the way things are on its head. With the rich man chuckling about his loss and the steward moving from enforcer of an unjust system that supports the rich to dishonest champion of the poor.

Read like that the parable may be not as hard as it first seemed. Or harder, depending on how we look at it.

"You cannot serve God and Wealth". There is an absolute either/or in those words that doesn't leave much room for compromise. The characters in the story serving wealth to start with end up breaking with the power it exerts. By the end of the story money is no longer what drives them. They've discovered there are more important things. Honour, and friendship, community, forgiveness, generosity, lifting others out of the mire, and the making room for a smile. They now stand a chance to end up at the Lazarus side of the chasm between rich and poor, or be the prodigal returning rather than ending up like the older brother

who objects to what he sees as his father's squandering of his inheritance in extravagant and unjustifiable waste at the return of his brother.

So where does that leave us? Where does it leave you? Where does it leave us as a Church? Surely not in a position where we are so obsessed by and attached to money that we feel our lives depend on it? Surely not in a position where we accept a world where the rich live at the expense of the poor and collude with its systems of oppression in an attempt to save our own skin. Surely not in a position where money and the security and independence it promises keeps us from generously giving and forgiving others. Surely not in a position where we are forever trying to stay on the side of wealth and financial security that divides our world into rich and poor, have and have nots, but instead forever aiming to end up on the side of the needy, the poor, those who are trampled and live life on the edge.

We are that rich man, challenged to let go of our wealth. We are the steward, challenged to move from one side of the divide to the other, no longer obsessed with money, but trying to build community and liberate others instead. But we are also the debtors, dependent on forgiveness and extravagant grace for our lives, our freedom, and our future. With nothing to call ours, all received from and owned by a God who would see us as a steward for what he has given us with grace, generosity and compassion. Amen.