

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 20-Year C- The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony  
Amos 8:4-7, Psalm 113, 1 Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13

The parable of the Dishonest Manager is thought by most scripture scholars to be the most difficult of all of the parables to understand. It is filled with contradictions and seemingly unconnected pieces of material. It goes against not only our human moral fabric of honesty but against everything we thought we knew about Jesus and his teaching. None of the explanations that have been brought forth have been entirely successful in making the meaning of the parable clear. It is a tangled web of actions and results that leave us confused and wondering if this was really Jesus at all. It is tempting to simply ignore it. But, to pick and choose only those words of Jesus which we find understandable, comfortable or affirming is a form of heresy. If we are to be people of faith, we have to take the whole of Jesus life and teaching to see clearly the path that Jesus proposes for us his followers.

Into this parable, I am about to wade where angels have feared to tread! I don't do so alone however. I've prayed for insight. I've read a number of the opinions of biblical scholars. There are as many interpretations as there are interpreters. I am grateful to the Rev. Robert Capon whose explanation I am relying on for much of what I share with you.

Jesus told a lot of stories as he traveled around Palestine. Many of those we find in the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Over the centuries some of these parables have come to be thought of as morality tales to establish the boundaries of right living. In morality tales, the good win out in the end and are rewarded and the bad are punished. Parables do not operate like this. The heroes of most of Jesus' parables were the weak, the helpless, the disenfranchised, the lost. These heroes of the parables are decidedly not folks like us. In Jesus' parables the proper way things should be are turned upside down with unexpected outcomes. Who would ever think that the dishonest manager would in the end be praised but that is exactly what happens. "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;"

There is another way of looking at parables. Rather than simply morality stories or teaching moments, we can see them as icons of Jesus and the work that Jesus came to accomplish. Icons are those images or episodes which engage our imagination and take us outside the immediate image or episode to the reality beyond. Icons take us outside of our heads into our hearts and our souls. In the words of one scripture scholar, they not only have meaning but also have "being". Icons in the context of parable have life and energy that reaches inside the story itself to bring us insight and understanding at a deeper level beyond our intellect. Like good poetry, good parables are ways of shocking the imagination, so that we can envision what is real beyond what we see and experience with our senses.

Imagination is part of the whole human being created in God's image. It is a gift we see often in children. Jesus came for many reasons but one of those surely was to re-ignite our sense of imagination. It is through our ability to imagine that we can touch God. We imagine what is God's intention for us. We allow ourselves to believe what our imagination reveals to us and in faith believe that it is possible. We accept then what is revealed and know that by grace we can be a part of what we envision. Finally, like the dishonest manager we

become shrewd in our faith and bold in the grace we are given. We are empowered to change the world, one piece and place at a time. Faith, grace, empowerment, that is what the manager experienced. In the process he went from dishonest manager to agent of God's change.

What we have in this parable is a story of grace. We talk about grace, sing about it, pray about it, ask for it, but for the most part we don't understand grace. My favorite definition of grace is a picture, one you can grasp with your imagination. It is not my definition, but one that comes from Fr. Capon. "Grace is like a light shining out of the house of faith, inviting us home." Grace does not function because we understand it. In fact, grace doesn't require anything on our part but to receive it and give thanks. It is not something we earn or deserve by being especially moral or good. Grace simply is a gift freely given by God. It is so astounding that in order for us to see it as a reality it took Jesus coming, dying and raising to bring it into focus.

This astounding free and unearned gift of grace comes to us because God loves each of us exactly how we are. Such love, when we accept it, operates in our hearts and gives us the desire to live as God calls us to live. Grace is not given for God's benefit or even for the benefit of the world. Grace is given to each of us for our benefit, because life is more abundant, more fruitful and filled with more peace when we do so.

The parable that is today's gospel is a parable of grace. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the final time. We know what awaited him there, arrest, crucifixion, death and blessedly resurrection. We know the rest of the story. But at this time, that was yet to come. Tax collectors and sinners had come to Jesus seeking his teaching. This made the Pharisees grumble unhappily. In response Jesus told a number of stories, stories we know well. He told of the 99 Sheep and the One that was lost and of the Prodigal Son. But the parable of the Dishonest Manager was told only to the disciples the small group that was committed in faith to Jesus. This parable of grace grew out of what was yet to come, out of crucifixion, death and resurrection. In the suggestion of an answer, I am again relying on the Fr. Robert Capon's words.

This parable told to the disciples, is a parable, an icon of Jesus and thus an icon of the way in which God works in the world. In Capon's view, the Dishonest Manager is a Christ figure. That is shocking. How can this be? In this story grace works through forgiveness, death and resurrection to establish a new way of living, the way of living that is God's intention of all of God's people.

Again, Capon: "This parable...says in story form what Jesus himself said by his life. He was not respectable. He broke the sabbath. He consorted with crooks. And he died a criminal." Think about this for a moment. The Manager was not respectable. He squandered his masters resources, he broke the rules, he consorted with criminals. In doing so, he died to his old life and was reborn to be praised by his Master. Again, Capon: "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." I would only add that grace, God's grace cannot come into the world if we insist on "business as usual". Grace requires that we die to the ways of the world and be reborn into the ways of God. It is an often difficult and always a lifelong rebirth. It is a rebirth that is for each of us.

Such rebirth that hinges first on forgiveness, the forgiveness we have for others and for ourselves. It is a resurrection that is rooted in the acceptance of God's love and the grace that grows out of that love. Such grace has the power to transform our lives and the life of the world. The rebirth begins with faith, the faith that comes when we choose to believe all that Jesus taught and all that Jesus is.

In faith, experiencing that grace which grows out of Jesus deep love for us, we can believe all that has been promised. Think of it as a circle, a cycle that never ends in this life. In faith, we begin with forgiveness, experience grace and come to deeper faith. Deeper faith brings us to more forgiveness, continued experiences of grace and ever deeper faith. This image of Christian life is a life made possible because Jesus came, lived, died, and was resurrected, all for us, each one of us.

Although it is September, this parable brings us face to face with Holy Week and Easter, Holy Week and Easter that are a part of our lives every day.