

18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 22, 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Luke 6: 1-13 - The dishonest Steward

This Gospel reading is one of those biblical passages that simply leaves me scratching my head! And apparently I'm not alone – various biblical scholars, and many commentators, say that this is the hardest of Jesus parables to interpret! I was tempted to bypass it and talk about Amos - but that's what I did last time! So here we are! The conniving steward!

Can it be that we're supposed to act dishonestly, as he did? I couldn't help but think that Jesus would have issued a disclaimer before he launched into the telling: something like "don't try this at home"! In fact in today's world what the steward does is a felony! So what is Jesus commending here? Not the steward's unethical practices, certainly. He has a different goal.

I suspect our problem is that we're a little like the rich landowner – we're so flabbergasted by the sheer audacity of the steward that we end up focusing on that and only that – his outrageously selfish, manipulative, and unethical behavior. Like the landowner we could easily find ourselves shaking our heads and clapping, even when we thoroughly disapprove of his behavior! The phrase "lovable rogue" comes to mind!

I've often wondered if this parable is so opaque because what ended up being transmitted to Luke wasn't clear to Luke either!

Some things about the parable you're never going to get if you don't understand the context, things that, for Jesus' listeners, would be a given – they'd have gotten it right away. So let's look at those.

Firstly, Roman and Jewish Law – like our own – expect restitution. When rogue English trader Nick Leeson lost \$1.4b of British Bank Barings (which caused its subsequent collapse in 1995) he was convicted of fraud and sent to jail for 5 years. Actions have consequences!

In the 1st Century the Romans would likely of crucified Leeson. Judaism was more forgiving! No execution. But the steward would have been expected to repay what he had lost his master – an entirely reasonable proposition.

This brings us to the first thing we miss: the Landowner simply dismissed the steward – no requirement that he repay what he'd lost. This is incredibly generous on the landowner's part, a modeling of forgiveness that would immediately have struck Jesus' listeners as both shocking and highly unusual.

It's also shocking and highly unusual in our own culture. I know of myself – and I suspect the same of most of you – that the unconditional forgiveness of the landowner is something that's very hard for us to embrace toward those who have wronged us.

The second thing that we miss is the consequences of the steward's behavior for the landowner – it's so clever that you can understand why Luke used the word "commend" to describe the

landowner's response. Not "congratulate", not "censor". More like "I'm in awe of your ability to manipulate this situation for your own benefit". Look at what's happened. The steward has altered the debtors contracts so that they owe less. A legitimate steward – not, in other words, one that had been fired – had every right to do this. The debtors simply believed the steward was acting on behalf of his master. Here's the "rock and hard place" the landowner now finds himself in. He could:

- invoke his right to cancel the reduction and restore the original contract. This is entirely legal, because he'd already fired the steward, making any contract he executed null and void. And you could argue he has an obligation to do so, because the new contracts were illegal. BUT.....he'd have some people mighty angry with him.
- On the other hand he could leave the new contracts in place. Not only will the steward have made new friends as a result, the debtors will really love the landowner! What a generous man! Of course, he'll also be a somewhat poorer man!

So what's more important to the landowner: the appropriate exercise of the law and the bringing to justice of the steward – along with the restoration of the money owed him – or the relationships with his debtors that have been strengthened, the new respect he has in his community, the reputation he has gleaned for generosity? The clear answer of the parable is the latter!

It seems to me that both of these things – a willingness to forgive unconditionally, and to make lemonade out of lemons – are being commended to us in this parable. Elsewhere Jesus talks about unconditional forgiveness, which is what "77 times" means: not at all easy! But it lies at the core of what it means to be a follower of Jesus: to seek to mirror in our own lives the way he sought to live his life. We will spend our entire lives trying to do this, and few – if any – will achieve it. But the journey, the process, is the thing, not the final destination.

It also seems to me that both of these things – unconditional forgiveness, and a surrendering of our focus on things are – in the end – about relationships. In particular, you can almost hear Jesus say "You cannot serve God and money." The Landowner had to choose and he chose relationship over money, which is another way of saying he chose God. He made God, and the relationships that come with choosing God, central to the way he acted in each case. He forgave, and he embraced the steward's hope – for friends in a time of need – even if he had to shake his head at the method the steward chose!!

Our lives are – or can be – a quest; we seek to distill down what's really important for us. At the very least, that's the discovery of the conniving steward – and his gift to us (even if unintentional!): that it's worth trying to figure out what we really want in our living – friends in a time of need, transformative relationships, a place to live and be happy – the list is our own to discover.

So seek out what it is you really want in life. And the caution of this story is this: do it in a way that doesn't give the "Landowner" the opportunity to have to shake his head at the way you try

and achieve them!