

## PROPER 20, PENTECOST 15, SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

There's a story about a farmer who had the misfortune of owing a large sum of money to the village money lender. This unscrupulous nasty money lender fancied the farmer's beautiful daughter, so he proposed a bargain. He would forgive the farmer's debt if he could marry the farmer's daughter.

Both the farmer and his daughter were horrified by the proposal, but the cunning money lender suggested that they let providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag. The girl would have to reach in and pick one pebble from the bag. If she picked the black pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be forgiven. If she picked the white pebble, she need not marry him and her father's debt would still be forgiven. If she refused to pick a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail until the debt was paid.

As they stood on a pebble strewn path, the money lender bent over to pick up two pebbles. The sharp-eyed girl noticed that he had picked up two black pebbles and put them into the bag. He then asked the girl to pick a pebble. Now, imagine that you were the girl standing in the field. What would you have done? If you had to advise her, what would you have told her?

There are at least three possibilities that I can see. (1) the girl could refuse to take a pebble but her father would then be thrown in jail. (2) the girl could pick a black pebble and sacrifice herself in order to save her father from debt and imprisonment. Or (3) the girl could pull out the two black pebbles in the bag, expose the money lender as a cheat, and likely fuel his immediate revenge.

What would you do? Well, here is what the girl did. She put her hand into the money bag and pulled out a pebble. Without looking at it, she fumbled and let it fall onto the pebble-strewn path, where it immediately became lost among all the other pebbles. "Oh how clumsy of me," she said. "But never mind, if you look into the bag for the one that is left, you will be able to tell which one I picked." Since the remaining pebble was black, it would have to be assumed that she had picked the white one. And since the money lender dared not to admit his dishonesty, the girl would have changed what seemed an impossible situation into an extremely advantageous one.

Don't we all love stories where the good guy uses his or her wit and cunning to defeat a villain? This story is in direct contrast to the story in today's gospel which is considered one of the most bizarre parables Jesus ever told.

A business owner finds out that his office manager is guilty of mismanagement. He calls in the manager and says "You've got two weeks to get ready for an audit. The manager knows he's in deep trouble and is going to get fired. He also knows he's too proud to beg and too weak to work; what to do? Suddenly, he has an idea. He calls in some of the company's biggest customers. "Have I got a deal for you?" he says. The plan is simple. He cuts their bills in half, destroys the paper trail and writes new invoices.

Now when the audit happens, no one can prove that he cheated and all the richest men in town will owe him a favor. His future is secure. Of course, when the owner looks at the doctored books he knows what has happened but there is nothing he can do about it. He knows he has been conned. And here's the surprise. He says to the man: "I have to admit it, you were pretty smart. You got me.

What in the world is Jesus trying to tell us? We believe honesty is the best policy, and we expect Jesus to be a good moral teacher. But here he is seeming to recommend and applaud the behavior of this scoundrel. Perhaps Jesus is acknowledging a world we know only too well. A world in which dishonesty, corruption, self-interest, and ill-gotten wealth rule the day. A world in which selfish ambition often secures praise and prosperity, while honesty garners cynicism and contempt. A world in which the heavy burden of debt cripples people both financially and morally. A world in which unfairness, exploitation, and privilege are so systemic, we barely notice much less protest. A world in which ethical living is neither straightforward nor easy.

Maybe the parable of the shrewd manager is simply a grim but truthful portrait of the world as it is — the real world in which we are called to be “children of light.” Maybe the story is an acknowledgment that the calling to the Christian life is both radically countercultural and painfully hard

The truth is, we as Christians live in a world that is profoundly interconnected and profoundly compromised. Even the tiniest financial decisions we make — where to shop, how to invest our money, what to eat or wear in an age of corporate greed, child labor, climate change, and globalization — have far-reaching consequences. Jesus’s parable reminds us to hold this complicated reality close to our hearts and our consciences all the time. To not do so is to succumb to the darkness of greed, indifference and power.

But, perhaps this parable is also telling us we don’t always know the full story. Why was the steward being dishonest and reckless in this way in the first place? Was he having problems at home, with his neighbors or was there something else that contributed to this glitch in judgment? Or was he simply a dishonest thief? But we have to ask the question, why because we owe it to him and ourselves to ask why.

The beauty of this strange and uncommon story is that Jesus understands his audience. While the example of the dishonest steward may be foreign to some, it is real to others, especially those with their backs against the wall. In this story, Jesus invites us to see our own journeys, and at the same time, the journeys of others. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to recognize that we so often are confronted with decisions that we’ve made that might not have been the best decision that hurt someone else. Sometimes people make poor choices and decisions because they are stuck for whatever reason trying to get out of a complicated situation. And in the end they become dishonest with their families, their children, their friends and even dishonest with themselves. So, Jesus understands what many of us try to forget, that most of us have made horrible decisions in our lives, and that we have all fallen short of what God expects of us.

Imagine with me for a moment a God who is not afraid to consider your why; a God who is not afraid to speak directly to the darkness in your life where you can’t see an out. Imagine a faith that believes you don’t have to end where you started. Imagine a God who recognizes and celebrates the potential you have even when you are failing miserably. Imagine a God who allows room for you to transition from being dishonest to honest. This is our God!

I think Jesus is asking us to recognize that you and I are more like that devious manager than we think. Maybe we mean to do good but instead shade a little truth here and try to impress a little there. Maybe Jesus wants us to acknowledge we’re not pulling off perfect lives and that we’ve made some messes. And what will matter is not how good

we are but how merciful God is and how savvy and resourceful we can be in picking up the pieces and starting over again. God gives us chances over and over again and this is what we call outrageous grace. It's what sets Christianity apart from other religions—the wild claim that at the heart of the universe is this relentless love, generosity, and compassion that will not stop no matter what.

And often it seems as if we Americans have trouble with this whole notion of grace because deep down we don't believe it. What we really believe is that "Everything has to be earned ultimately, paid for." We seem to believe that God is a negotiator and that we can only receive God's grace as a reward for being good. And American culture doesn't "get" grace at all. You know the old lines. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Everything is for sale. You are what you accomplish.

But that is not who God is and never has been. If we could only lay hold of the outrageous grace that God is showering on each of us, maybe we could learn to be more people of grace to each other.

This morning Jesus is showing us an outrageous grace, a God we can hardly imagine. And what God is saying is to us is that no matter how far we fall or fail we are loved with a limitless...fathomless...all-embracing love." That's the most important news we'll ever hear. Amen.