



Oh Lord: May your word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

This is one of the most perplexing of Jesus' parables in the Gospels. It is often called the Parable of the Dishonest Manager.

Let me quickly summarize and slightly embellish the story Jesus tells.

A wealthy landowner finds out his chief property manager has been untrustworthy in managing the agricultural products of his land. The rich man calls the manager in to fire him. As the now-fired manager leaves his former boss's office with a pink slip, he forms a plan. He goes back to his office and calls in his master's clients. He greatly reduces their bills and sends them on their way. He hopes they will give him a job because of his generosity. The landlord finds out and congratulates his former manager on his foresight. After telling the story, Jesus then also commends the behavior of the now unemployed manager.

This immediately raises all sorts of questions for us, primary among them: what is commendable about the manager's behavior? Why would the rich man congratulate him on his deceit? And why would Jesus add his approval as well? It's not what we expect from a wronged boss, and it's not what we expect from a religious teacher.

Here we have to remember the definition of a parable: a story taken from everyday life that leaves sufficient doubt as to its meaning so as to tease the mind into active thought. Professor C.H. Dodd, a Princeton Bible Scholar from the 1930s gave us that idea. Or a more modern definition, from Clarence Jordan: a simple story wrapped around a stick of dynamite.

One of Jesus' favorite teaching tools was the parable, and often a parable does not yield a straight-forward moral or pat instruction. Unlike with allegories, there are no simple one to one correspondences between characters in the story, and characters or situations outside the story.

And I think that's God's way of reminding us that we don't run the show AND that following Jesus requires us to constantly question what we think we know about how God's economy works. In this case, we get an invitation to simply receive the sometimes confusing generosity and mercy of God. We can't control God and how God dispenses generosity and mercy.

I came across a wonderful story that illustrates this confusing and surprising generosity and mercy of God. It is told by Eugene Peterson, pastor, writer, author of the Bible translation called The Message, which I commend to you.

Peterson was visiting a parishioner at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. He was having a hard time finding a parking spot, so he circled and circled the hospital. He remembered that he had friends who prayed for parking spots in these cases, and so he prayed, and lo and behold, a space open up for him just ahead.

He was pleased to have experienced this minor miracle, but also to have a story to impress his friends that he was an effective pray-er. He locked his car and went into the hospital.

After visiting his parishioner, he returned to his car—providentially parked in a suddenly open spot—excited to boast to his friends about his successful prayer life. And as he went for his keys to open the car door, he could see through window that his keys were actually still in the ignition. He sat there, flummoxed. A moment later, a boy, perhaps 10 or so, came up to him and asked, “Something wrong, Mister?” He said, “Yes, I locked my keys in my car.” The boy responded, “I can help you.” He took a piece of wire out of his pocket, and in about 30 seconds, had the door opened, reached in, and gave Peterson his keys. Peterson said to the boy “I’m sure glad you were here!” The boy smiled widely and said, “Is it worth a dollar to you?” Peterson praised the boy as he reached for his wallet: “A dollar? It’s worth 2 dollars!” and handed him the money. (Christian Century, October 7, 2008)

Peterson reflects on his experience in light of this parable. The parable shows a crooked manager praised for an act of dishonesty, and a rascal commended for being a rascal. Here was a kid from the streets of inner-city Baltimore, living by his wits, picking locks for spare change, being praised for his creative and questionable skills in ingenious survival. And here was a smug pastor, puffed up with pride at his supposed success at praying for a parking spot, ready to boast to his friends—coming face to face with a street urchin saying “Can I help you mister?”

The Confusing and Expected Generosity of God in our lives.

This story is a reminder for me that Jesus teaches us to see the generosity of God in the most unlikely places, that a receptive heart is able to see God’s generosity everywhere, and in fact, expects to see it. Jesus tells us that not only do we *not* control God’s generosity, with the right mindset and heartset, we begin to *see* God’s generosity *everywhere*.

One of my favorite passages of scripture comes from the book of Proverbs. It goes like this: *A grateful heart sits at a continuous feast*. It’s from Proverbs 15.15. Some translations say a *cheerful* heart, others say *happy* heart, others say *merry* heart; but in for me *grateful* heart resonates with my experience. *A grateful heart sits at a continuous feast*. It may be that because this scripture has been on my heart and mind for quite some time, that I’m seeing the world in its light.

It’s a mindset and heartset that, when engaged, even the smallest experience feels like a gift, even when the larger context may not suggest it. For example, as I mentioned last week, I am the one in my house who is often losing things. Sometimes, I am almost literally beside myself with frustration. Sometimes it’s also possible in the midst of an episode, when engaging my grateful heart, to remember that God has given me eyes to see, and lungs to breathe with slowly, and the heart knowledge that I don’t even need to find this thing right now, or ever! I still have what I need. It’s definitely not the same as denying that something bad or uncomfortable is happening. But it is a step towards seeing God’s provision in all things.

We’re not too far from the beginning of that time of the year when we talk a bit more openly about money. In a couple of weeks, in fact. And this year, perhaps more than other recent years, there is more anxiety in our culture about money. Though gas prices seem to be coming down, overall inflation is galloping along at a pace that we haven’t seen in forty years. Those of us on fixed incomes, getting ready to retire, or using investments to help pay for college, may be feeling the pinch.

God's Confusing and Unexpected Generosity and Mercy
September 18, 2022: The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



And yet a grateful heart can help us see the feast that is all around us and see the ways that we can offer that feast to others. And yet a grateful heart can see God's abundance everywhere, even in unexpected places. **Amen.**