

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 18, 2016

***"THE INJUSTICE OF GRACE"***  
*by Mary Anne Biggs*

1 Timothy 2:1-7 ~ Luke 16:1-13

People usually get what they deserve, don't you think? Leo Rosten tells the story of two guys who were partners in a men's clothing store. They made a fortune and put their eight children through college taking advantage of people's greed by pretending to be deaf. One partner would play the clerk ... and greet a customer by extolling the qualities of a suit the customer was eyeing. Naturally the customer would ask, "How much is it?" Cupping one ear, the "clerk" would say, "Wha-a-at?" "How-much-is-it?" the customer would ask, a little louder. "Huh?" asked the "clerk." "How much!!" the customer would shout. "Ah, the price!" he would say. "I'll have to ask the boss." Then he would shout back to his partner: "Sid, how much for the beautiful blue double-breasted suit?" "Two hundred dollars," Sid would shout back. Then the "deaf" clerk would turn to the customer and report, "The boss says a hundred dollars." Almost always their customers would quickly plop down the hundred dollars and leave the store laughing ... thinking they had pulled a fast one ... when the partners had actually made a killing on the price.

Something in us loves to see the cheater get cheated. And we enjoy stories about the underdog who wins ... the quick thinker who outsmarts the experts ... the rascal who finds a way out of an impossible jam. How many stories have you heard where the weak defeat the powerful or the uneducated outwit the scholars? Such tales especially thrive among oppressed and marginalized peoples. When you have no power, you have to think fast to survive.

Joseph Telushkin tells the story of the old Jewish man who was accosted by a Russian soldier as he was riding on the Trans-Siberian Railroad in the early 1900's. This old man was minding his own business ... eating some pickled herring for lunch ... when one of the officers of the Czar approached him. "How can you Jews eat such disgusting food?" he asked. "It's good for the brain ... makes you smarter," answered the Jew. "How much do you have there?" asked the officer. "A dozen pieces," said the Jew. "I can sell them to you for twenty rubles." The officer pays him ... takes a bite ... then suddenly stops. "This is ridiculous!" he says. "In Moscow I could have bought all this herring for a few kopecks!" "You see!" says the old Jew, "Already it's working!"

Jesus told one of these underdog stories about a rich man who was duped by one of his managers. It's an uncomfortable story for orthodox interpreters, because it seems to affirm dishonesty. A rich man heard that one of his managers was squandering his property so he called him on the carpet and fired him. The manager was in a pickle ... and it didn't help that he had brought it upon himself. "What am I going to do?" he said. "I'm too weak to dig and too proud to beg." So he cooked up a scheme and moved into action quickly. It was a case of "scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. He went to the rich man's creditors ... asked for the promissory notes he had signed ... and reduced them significantly. It wasn't his right, of course. It wasn't his money! He already owed the rich man for the property he had squandered. But the creditors

were so grateful to this sneaky manager, that they helped the guy until he could land on his feet. They owed him one ... or maybe they were afraid that he might testify against them for participating in this fraud. They were partners in crime.

Here's the twist ... when the rich man discovered the scheme, he didn't get angry. He didn't drag them all into court to get what was rightfully his. He didn't even condemn the former manager. Instead, he commended the quick-witted fellow. "Well, you got me!" he said. "Way to go!" It's a good joke, and it plays on everybody's inherent greed, but what is Jesus' point? The whole thing is shoddy, and none of these characters are very savory, let alone sympathetic. Sounds like something you might see on the nightly news these days. Why would Jesus teach his disciples a parable like that?

If you want to see a preacher dance, ask one to explain this story. You will get a lesson in interpretive equivocation, and it begins with Luke. In the gospels, it's always hard to tell where Jesus' words end and the author's begin. Most scholars agree that Jesus' words here end with the end of the story in the first half of verse eight: "*And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly*" (Luke 16:8a). But that's not enough ... some might misunderstand ... so Luke begins to comment:

*For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.... And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.... Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.... If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own...? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.... You cannot serve God and wealth (Luke 16:8-16).*

The tip-off here is that Luke gives us not one, but at least five different "morals to the story." Clearly, he's uncomfortable with the unethical cast of the parable and tries to soften it the best he can. Luke doesn't like rich people much anyway. (We have another negative parable about the rich to read in Luke next week, and he never has anything nice to say about the rich folk in his gospel.) For Luke, this is an opportunity to talk about the corrupting influence of wealth, but he still dances around. "It just goes to show you how all those wealthy people behave. If you are wealthy use it as a means to build a generous and helpful spirit. Wealth is a form of idolatry anyway." He's all over the place.

Interpreters ever since have struggled with this story, too. Some say it shows Jesus' general disregard for material concerns, the ethical issues not mattering to him so much because the whole business world is hopelessly corrupt anyway, and the story just shows how depraved human dealings generally are. But is Jesus really that cynical? Some say the story is about justice for the oppressed ... that the manager had been unfairly fired and got even with his boss by doing just what he had been accused of ... just as all the laborers who have been cheated will one day get even. And some say the creditors didn't know the man had been fired ... that they accepted the bargain in good faith ... then so praised the rich man for his generosity that he was pleased to have such happy customers. But these interpretations add details to the story which aren't actually there.

Others say Jesus was just repeating one of these popular underdog stories of his time, or maybe even the popular tale got attached to a collection of Jesus' parables along the way, and he never really told it at all. Kind of an early version of internet humor that gets passed around so much you have no idea where it started. But none of these interpretations arise from the text ... they arise from our discomfort with the text. They arise from our inability to answer the questions that the text raises. And that's okay. Sometimes the meaning of the Bible is elusive. Jesus' stories occasionally raise more questions than they answer, and living with the questions is the point. Jesus never led us disciples to some Gnostic arrogance that we have all the answers. The questions keep us seeking and searching and engaging God in our lives. Which means we preachers are like the folks in Congress ... in this one respect ... we presume permission to revise and extend our remarks even to the point of reversing ourselves later!

To be sure, Luke's comments have become a part of scripture, and we should hear them as such. Materialism is probably the most common form of idolatry today, and we are all infected with it. But what if Jesus wasn't talking about wealth with this story after all? What if, in the first place, he was really talking about spiritual issues and using a mundane story to illustrate it, as was his custom? I read this story as one of those popular "little guy outsmarts the big guy" stories where Jesus sees a deeper point. I read this parable of the rich man in relation to the parable about the rich man and Lazarus we will hear next week. Both parables are about getting ready for judgment ... the judgment at the end of the world when God puts an exclamation point to history ... or the judgment at the end of our world when everybody, including God, gathers to evaluate what our life added up to. After all, we are all poor managers of the wealth God has given us. At least one interpreter suggests that Jesus is praising the man who realizes the jam he's in and gets busy investing in the future ... which is more than Jesus can say for the spiritual deadheads of his day who don't even realize the mess they're in and do nothing to forestall the consequences coming upon them.

According to the Bible, we have no assets of our own ... everything we have belongs to God ... and we are merely the caretakers of God's wealth. We get to share in it as we share it with others. The old fashioned word for this is "stewardship," but stewardship is not just about money and tithing and supporting the ministries of the church. (Of course it is also about that. Check your mail for our Stewardship letter soon!) But stewardship is also about the way we manage all the resources God has placed in our hands ... our time ... our abilities ... our relationships ... our lives. And the greatest resource God has given us is grace, the chance to begin again. But we squander that, too, don't we? We fall back into our old patterns. We throw it away. We take our relationship with God for granted. Or we refuse to accept it and keep trying to earn favor with God like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son ... always comparing ourselves to somebody else ... judging them so we can convince God that we aren't so bad after all. Who could blame God for firing us as the stewards of a good creation? We deserve judgment, and we don't need some fire-breathing evangelist to tell us that because we know it in our hearts.

Realizing this position before God, what should do we do? We should go out to God's other creditors, and we offer them grace. We have no right, but we should do it anyway. And instead of punishing us for such audacity ... offering grace to sinners ... God will commend us. Thus, the dishonesty of the story is precisely the point. Grace is unfair. We don't deserve it. We waste it when we get it. But God is pleased to give us more grace anyway ... even to commend us for letting others off the hook, too. We really don't want to tell this to our children whom we are

trying to rear to be honest and good and just in their treatment of others and to understand the consequences when they don't. But the truth is ... most people don't get what they deserve. Thank God ... for there isn't a one of us who doesn't need God's grace again and again and again!

How do we get ready for the judgment we deserve? By presuming God will forgive us and doing nothing to shape our souls towards God? No! By pronouncing God's judgment against others ... making ourselves feel better by condemning those who are worse? No! We prepare for God's judgment by becoming God-like in offering generous grace to all of those who are debtors before God, which is everybody, of course, and by bending our spirits towards God's love.

A Christian child was found murdered in Seville in the Middle Ages. The people blamed the Jews, and the Inquisitor called the town's Rabbi before him. The Rabbi made an elegant and compelling defense. It didn't matter. The Inquisitor looked to heaven and piously announced: "We will leave this matter to God by drawing lots. I will place two pieces of paper in my hat. One will say 'guilty' and the other 'not guilty.' Before God this Rabbi will draw out the truth. If the Jews are not guilty, we will let them go. If they are guilty, they will be burned at the stake." The Inquisitor, presuming them to be evil, wrote "guilty" on both pieces of paper. Suspecting as much, the Rabbi drew a piece of paper from the hat and promptly swallowed it! "What is the meaning of this, Jew?" cried the Inquisitor. "How can we know the verdict if you have swallowed it?" "Simple," said the Rabbi. "You need only look at the paper left in the hat. What I swallowed must be its opposite!" They read the paper remaining in the hat. It said "guilty," so they had to set them free.

In his letter to the Romans (so often used perversely to condemn the people of whom the preachers don't approve,) the Apostle Paul writes: "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1). No condemnation. That is the sentence God has pronounced on you. You don't deserve it, but there it is. Christ has swallowed your guilt. He absorbed your failed stewardship into the love of God. Accept it. Share it. Go out and tell everybody you know. And God will commend you. That is the good news. May we pray?

God, make us the carriers of your grace to every person we meet. Forgive us for the harsh judgments we lay upon those we don't like, and teach us to forgive debts as you do. Free us to be the joyful and faithful caretakers of the rich resources you have placed in our hands and together to offer this new beginning to others in Jesus' name. Amen.