

Restoring Community – Judy Cox

Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Three weeks ago Ben challenged us to choose between generosity and safety; last Sunday Brian warned us against becoming moral idiots. Now, this Sunday, the Gospel reading hands us a guy who gets to have it both ways. Cynically he works the system to use generosity itself for his own future security. Amoral and selfish, he's praised by *the master* as *shrewd*—both master and steward seem like moral idiots!

Our Old Testament text only seems to mix the messages further. Amos accuses Israel's businessmen, as he earlier has their wealthy women, of crimes against the needy, poor and afflicted, even to exterminating the poor. They cynically use careful Sabbath observance to appear religious while they greedily and creatively cheat their customers every way they can. Think payday loan billboard shamelessly displaying a fish in the lower right corner! Amos insists that the rubber has to hit the road—our religion has to affect our cash and our commerce, our week as well as our worship on the weekend—and God notices! As the psalmist reminds us, God actively rescues the poor and the needy, all those without resources. Woe to those from whom they need rescuing!

So then we come to this odd little story recounted by Pastor Luke, the middle one of three parables in a row. (Like Brian, I'm frustrated that the lectionary robs us of the full context—although didn't we all love hearing Jim Reinhard on The Prodigal during Lent?!) And it's worth reminding ourselves, about now, that a parable, a story "thrown alongside," refuses us easy answers, and provokes us to think more deeply. Our passage today certainly does all that!

These three parables all begin with "a certain man," who in the first is clearly a "prodigal" God figure and most assuredly is not in the last (that of the rich man and Lazarus). Here in the middle, we're still confused. The context doesn't help us figure out this ambiguous figure of *the master* after all. On the one hand, he might be the stock character of the wealthy patron-villain; on the other hand, he too might prodigally forgive this story's "squanderer," the go-between steward. But wait, we don't get the rest of the story. All we hear is the master's commendation for shrewd action, then cut to a sort of narrator's comment on the relational naïveté of *the children of light*.

The steward's role is just as unclear. Maybe he's a clever rascal exposing his employer as a greedy, hypocritical criminal, like those businessmen Amos called out. After all, interest was illegal according to Torah, but creative ways around that prohibition included charging it in "kind" instead of cash—which might be happening here, with the debts owed in olive oil and wheat. So is the steward a kind of sketchy hero? (Jesus called him *dishonest*, remember?) Conveniently not mentioning that his master has fired him, he may take this last-ditch action, removing the illegal and unjust interest laid on his master's debtors in a way that the master can't argue against. Is that why the master doesn't overturn the debt forgiveness? Or might it have to do with how good, how generous and community-minded the steward has made his master look? In their culture it would be difficult to refuse the public honor, even shameful to say, "Umm, no, I'm not that generous patron, he was illegally misrepresenting me, you all still owe me!"

On the other hand, the debt reduction could be in the amount the steward had padded the bill. Is he actually giving up his own cut now in a manipulative, calculated way, for his hope of greater returns of good will and reciprocal obligation in the future? Or is he reducing only the amount legally, actually owed?

Most of all, why would Jesus even tell this story? How does shrewd, self-seeking action fit with the Kingdom he proclaims?

Jesus tells a lot of parables!—and not all of them function in the same way. Remember the story of the unjust judge, who finally gave the persistent widow justice, only because she kept bothering him so much? (If you don't remember, hang on. It comes from Pastor Luke's collection, too, and the lectionary brings us to sit with it next month.) It's one of the "how much more, then" parables—if this obvious jerk finally behaves as he should, as a human judge, how much more will God the judge bring justice?!? So in our parable today we don't need to find a moral exemplar, a "good guy," someone who's practically perfect in every way, to learn from it. In fact, perhaps what we most need is to stop fretting about what's wrong here, and look at what's made right.

Despite the dishonesty and self-centeredness of this guy, this squanderer of his master's resources, good is done—the indebted, the poor are helped. There is a Kingdom ending! His motives are wrong, but by his actions, the steward has restored community. He wants to put himself in good relationship (perhaps for the first time!) with the grateful debtors. But there are other outcomes as well—think about it. When these debts are forgiven, the debtors praise the generosity of the master as well as the steward, the master commends the steward he had threatened to fire, and the steward helps others as well as himself. It's a win-win!

Yes, forgiveness of debts has restored community—perhaps even created community, where there was little but wariness or hostility.

How does forgiveness create and restore community, restore relationships? Luke shows us Jesus creating community with the outcast tax collectors and sinners now gathering around him, with whom he shares table fellowship. And the Pharisees are horrified by it! They play the role of the resentful elder brother, objecting to this scandalous forgiveness and restoration. They want no part in this community!

If this dishonest steward can model restoring community, how much more, then, the restored and forgiven people of God? How much more can we create community through our forgiveness?

What relationships can be restored if we Jesus followers actually do what we pray each week, in the prayer Jesus taught? As we *forgive our debtors*, what forgiveness might we ourselves experience, and what relationships might be restored?!?

Individually we are to listen, certainly—but also, as a community. How might our collective forgiveness play a role in allowing us to claim that invitation to the Table, as those who "live in love and peace with their neighbors"? Who are those whom we have not forgiven, and how do our communities need the restoration that could come through our forgiveness?

But on the back end of this steward's story we encounter the rich man and Lazarus; we're reminded that Luke never lets us spiritualize away the bite of accountability for our money. He sees wealth in and of itself as a snare that deludes us to the realities of Kingdom life—notice the repeated description *dishonest wealth*? He's the Gospel writer who insists that not *the poor in spirit* but the financially poor are those blessed, and in possession of *the Kingdom of God*. Amos and the psalmist would agree that those literally poor are God's priority! Today scripture won't let us settle for happy thoughts of forgiven and restored relationships, easy or not so easy, without some boots-on-the-ground consideration of how it impacts our wallets.

Let me bring home to you some of these implications with a story of getting it wrong. Talk about relationally naïve!—that was us, too soon old and too late smart. The desperate couple was up against the wall with no way forward financially. We should have freely given, encouraging them to look to when they themselves got on their feet financially, and could pay our gift forward to another desperate family. After all, we had agreed already, just between the two of us, that we were good with this being an outright gift. But instead, misguidedly deciding to require some financial accountability, we set up a limited repayment plan. Some of you wiser folk can predict what happened—they stopped calling, dropped off our radar, and then left town. Apparently, setting up that formal debt broke our relationship, changing it from friendship to (from their view) heavy, one-sided obligation. An outright gift probably would not have done so, but now we'll never know.

So let me rephrase my questions to align better with Pastor Luke. How can we create community through forgiveness of actual financial debts? How can we handle our money, individually and collectively, in a way that makes for flourishing community, and helps others without hurting them? We understand ourselves as stewards of God's good gifts, at least in worship on the weekend ☺—does our use of them during the week enhance God's reputation for generosity? Do we make God look good? How can we, how do we, leverage the privilege and financial resources entrusted to us to strengthen community relationships?

St. Paul's has taken huge steps toward this posture in three ways: by committing to double our "missional" giving outside of our walls—sacrificial stewardship—and by giving just as much to local missional work as to the more traditional "global missions"—looking to our neighbors' needs. And we have committed to regular support of the Ministerial Alliance's Benevolence Fund, to help Greenville's poor with such boots-on-the-ground needs as utilities, rent and transportation. We have literally invested in our surrounding community.

By the convicting grace of the Holy Spirit, may each of us have our eyes opened to the realities of Kingdom life, so that individually we can take such a posture as well. May we show generosity sacrificially instead of calculating our advantage (noting where we'll get the tax breaks!?!). And may all our resources, not the least financial, be poured out generously for the Kingdom work of relationships, to create and foster community and bring glory to God.

In the name of the Triune God, generously given for us in the person of Jesus Christ—forgiving and restoring us to that divine community and fellowship! Amen.