

“The Steward Puzzle” – Rev. Jennifer Adams

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Every now and again, from the gospels we get a parable that is more like a puzzle than a simple story. These are the parables where my initial reaction tends to be to scratch my head rather than to sense immediately what the message seems to be. And this morning’s parable is one of those. This passage from Luke is known as the parable of the “dishonest steward,” and having just heard it, you can probably tell how it got its name. Throughout the entire story, all the main character did was basically cover his own neck. He was essentially a selfish person. This manager, “the dishonest steward” as he’s come to be known was no good Samaritan, that’s for sure. He doesn’t begin to rank among the parable greats as “one who did good out of the pure and admirable goodness of his heart,” does he? Which is why this parable is a puzzle to me. Why would Jesus ask us to hold up this way of being in the world?

The manager had a job collecting “rent” for a landowner. And at some point, the landowner discovered that this manager was “squandering” his property and so he threatened to fire him. Given that not-so-pleasant scenario of being without employment, the manager considered his options and came to the personal insight that he was, “not strong enough to dig and ashamed to beg.” In other words, this guy had the self-realization that he wasn’t cut out for hardship or manual labor. And so he figured that his only way out of the situation was to get in the good favor of the tenants, the ones from whom he had been collecting payments. And so he went around and reduced all their debts, (as if this were his to do.) To the one who owed 100 jugs of olive oil he said, “Take your bill, sit down quickly and make it fifty.” To the one who owed 100 containers of wheat he said “Take your bill and make it 80.” Now remember the debts weren’t owed to him. They were owed to the landowner. And the manager only did all of this so that he could stay alive and well and in the good graces of at least somebody. And so it all sounds kind of slimy to me. It’s not like he was acting out of concern for those people who owed rent. It’s not like his heart had broken open for these people who had accumulated significant debt. He was only looking out for himself.

Which is part of why this parable feels like a puzzle. It’s not so much that there is a missing piece but that there’s a less than attractive piece that doesn’t seem to fit the image of what it means to serve God. Or maybe, more honestly, there’s a piece that I don’t want to have to include in my puzzle of what it means to serve God. I don’t really want to hear that someone who ran away from working hard, figured out some shrewd scheme and forgave some debt not out of goodness but out of fear, I don’t want to hear that in the end, he got praised for his actions. This might sound ugly but those aren’t the kind of people I want to come out on the good end of things. (Even though if you asked me in another context, I’d say that I want everyone to come out well.) Turns out that the shrewd, lazy, fearful, manipulative folk aren’t really on my list, after all. I’m not sure I want them punished but I certainly don’t want them praised, let alone in the gospel. The kind of story I want to hear is one in which some very earnest soul had a very genuine change of heart, realized he’d treated others unfairly, deeply repented of his sins, forgave others’ debts and then got praised for his actions.

Because that kind of story makes sense. At least how I have set it up in my head. The pieces fit in that kind of puzzle. But as simple and attractive as that kind of puzzle is, that's not always how it plays out. Nor can it. And I think the good news of this passage is that God does not need that kind of one-hundred-percent inner and outer personal alignment in order to make good things happen. God can work with any piece, no matter its shape or size or edges or inconsistencies. While I want our intentions to align with our actions to be consistent with our outcomes and to be in agreement with the larger vision of the kingdom of God, and while that desire isn't necessarily bad, God on the other hand says, "Well, this piece is nowhere near perfect, but I, God, can work with it."

And remember that the people whose debts were forgiven probably didn't ask a whole lot of questions, they were simply happy to be a little less in the hole. Imagine if they had waited for the scenario that I wanted to hear in this story. "Well, thanks manager but we want You to keep demanding 100 jugs of oil from us until YOU fully understand forgiveness and are acting out of genuine compassion for us." Probably not, right? Because for the people forgiven, the story wasn't only about the steward, it was about them too. And the good news was obvious. And so then I wonder if this is more a parable about life than it is a parable about the kingdom. Maybe it's a parable about how God redeems in the here and now through whatever pieces happen to be on the table on whatever day. The good news then is that kingdom like things can happen, things like forgiveness can happen, generosity can happen, freedom can happen before we get to that place where actions and outcomes and intentions and vision are all aligned in their completeness with holy sorts of things.

Beneath all of this of course is the message that each and every one of us is the piece of the puzzle that this parable asks us to embrace. You and I are each a piece that doesn't quite fit into complete kingdom ways of being. Each and every one of us is at least a little out of sync with what it means to be, to live out every moment of every day in the kingdom of God. In my heart of hearts that there is compassion and it is at times overwhelmingly in charge of what I say and what I do, but there is also apathy lurking in there and sometimes it wins out. Maybe for you too? My actions are often filled with a very genuine love of my neighbor but often they are also tinged with at least a little bit of judgment and I'm probably not the only one for whom that's true. And my arms and my mind are open but when it comes right down to an honest glance, there are people whom I would not include on the list of those whom I hope get praised by God. Which makes me a steward of sorts, but one whose preceding adjective isn't quite always where I want it to be. But, and this is the grace of this parable. . . even given all of that, given all of the complexities and inconsistencies of what it is that makes up the piece of the puzzle that is me, God says "I'll fit you in. You have a place here. Now, it might be next to someone like the dishonest steward, but you're going to have to get over that."

And so that's my work this week. To let the puzzle be God's and to do whatever I can to help goodness happen in this world. To help forgiveness and freedom happen in this world. Out of the best intentions I can muster trusting that God will be here to redeem those places, those moments where I am not yet of God.

Amen.