

Sermon for 19 September 2010
17 Pentecost; Proper 20, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

This morning's Gospel contains what is probably the most baffling of Jesus' parables. If you were paying attention it might have struck you as more than odd. It likely would have seemed like I misread something to horrible effect, because it seems to run counter to everything we know about Jesus: *And I tell you, [he says] make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon.* The more recent translations make the point even more sharply: *And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.*

So troubling are these words that, even from very early on, Christians have tried to argue that this is a mistake in how Luke recorded our Lord's words, and critics of Christianity have used it as proof of the faith's inconsistency. Julian the

Apostate—the Roman Emperor who turned back to paganism after generations of Christian Emperors—claimed this passage as proof that Jesus was no more God than any other fallible man. And if we look at the text, it appears that Luke himself didn't know what to do with this saying. Surely, he included it because Jesus said it, but then he tacks a number of Jesus' other, apparently contradictory sayings about the dangers of mammon on to the end. So, we go from "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon" to "you cannot serve [both] God and mammon" in the span of a few verses.

What in heaven's name are we going to do with this? Well, I want to suggest an alternate reading as a possibility—a possibility, not the gospel truth, necessarily—by means of a somewhat radical reinterpretation. It requires us to be a little playful with the text, and it gets a little

complex, but it is at least one way of making sense of something that seems so counterintuitive.

You will remember from last week that we sometimes misunderstand parables because we reckon their protagonists to be us rather than God. Keep that in mind. There is another truth about parables which also affects how we read them, and that is that *parables are not allegories*. You know what an allegory is. It is, very simply put, a work in which there is a one-to-one correlation between characters and actions in the text and in real life. So, in that most famous allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the protagonist "Christian" stands in for the Christian soul, the gatekeeper "Goodwill" stands in for Christ, the "Shining Ones" are the Holy Angels, and so forth.

But parables are not allegories. They give us an insight into the nature of God or of the Christian life, but not every detail is meant to sync up with the reality. So, in last week's Gospel

we heard the parable of the lost coin, and determined that the woman was to be seen as God and the coin as the lost soul, but the woman's penury is a plot device rather than a symbol suggesting that God is somehow poor.

So let us apply these two facts—that we often mistake whom the parable is about and that parables are not allegories—to this morning's Gospel. Remember what happened? The steward is fired for defrauding his master, and he proceeds to collect less than what is owed from the master's debtors in order to ingratiate himself to them. Ultimately, the master commends the steward for his shrewd rejection of justice. The just, or *righteous*, path would have been to collect all that was owed, but such justice often lacks mercy. The steward is less interested in what is *fair* than he is in what is *effective* in bringing about rapprochement.

Now, what if this parable is not about us and our business dealings? What if it's actually about

Jesus? Remember, parables aren't allegories, so we don't have to see the steward's initial unfaithfulness as anything other than a plot device to get the story going. In other words, just by positing Jesus in the role of the steward, we don't have to claim that Jesus has defrauded God or something like that. The important part is what the steward does with the debtors. They owe something, and the steward cuts them a break so that he might be taken in by one them. This is called "unrighteous" in the parable, but we miss the point if we impose our own understanding of righteousness onto the text. In fact, a better word would be "unlawful", because that's what a first-century Jew would have understood the word "unrighteous" to mean. The law demanded full payment.

If the steward is supposed to be Jesus, the parable is not about money at all. Luke probably added the bits afterward about not serving God and mammon, because even he didn't understand what the

parable was about. It's not about money, but rather about the human soul and sin. By all rights, we've got a debt we cannot pay. The fair thing, the lawful thing, the righteous thing, would be for each of us to suffer the consequences. But just like the steward, who desired to live with one of the debtors, Jesus desires to dwell with us and within us. And just like the steward, Christ knows that that can't happen if he follows "the rules". To use a phrase which crept into our political consciousness a few years ago, Jesus has "gone rogue".

That we can have a relationship with Jesus is not fair; justice would demand the opposite. If a friend were to constantly turn his back on any one of us, to break faith and defraud us, we would be just to end the friendship. So, too, would God have been within his rights to cut us loose. The children of Israel had a conditional relationship with God. God promised to remain faithful *if and*

only if they kept their end of the bargain, if they followed the Old Testament rules. They didn't. We were supposed to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. We still don't. But then what God did was shocking, an affront to fairness and justice. He said "no more conditions. I will love you unconditionally." That wasn't the deal. He didn't have to do it, but He loved us so much that He desired to stay in relationship with us whatever the costs to Himself, knowing that the cost would ultimately be His Son's life. Mercy has trumped fairness; love has overcome the law.

As I've said before, this doesn't mean that we don't have any expectations. It doesn't mean that we should follow Martin Luther's advice by "sinning boldly, that grace may abound." What it does mean is that there isn't anything we can do to make God stop loving us. He's broken the rules for us already; He's bailed us out when we should have

been left in chains. Thankfully we have an opportunity to do a little toward repaying this debt which has already been forgiven. We can offer our thanks, which is why we keep showing up here week after week. We can try to love Him back, even if we haven't enough love in us to go very far in that regard. Most of all, we can permit Him to live in our hearts. That is not a one-time deal, no matter what the televangelists tell you. That is a daily choice. We can let Him in or evict Him. But before we do the latter, let's remember that that's why he bent the rules in the first place. That's why he showed mercy when justice demanded wrath. He who on earth had no home, wants only to live in us. Will we make room?

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Amen.