

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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Shameless Grace

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 22, 2013
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 16:1-13*

What? Were you listening to the Gospel? If you were, you are probably thinking, "Surely I am missing something here." I'd have it reread if I thought that it would help, but I truly don't. Known as the Parable of the Unjust Steward or the Parable of the Dishonest Servant, it has baffled preachers and scholars through the years. Literally tomes have been written about it from all ends of the theological spectrum. And the truth is that even the literalists have trouble making this passage sensible.

And, yet, if for no other reason than for how shockingly confusing it is, there is something to be gained from struggling with it. Many scholars believe that this was a story making the rounds at the time of Jesus' life, a secular story being told and retold, perhaps with some details missing from what we have of it or maybe told just this way. We really don't know. It seems likely that Jesus is being humorous, perhaps ironic, and certainly provocative to use it when talking about God. Jesus, defying the rules of polite society, did not shy away from talking about the very thorny issue of money. It was a topic that held great power then as it does now, and for him it seemed like fair game.

More than likely this story was aimed toward the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious professionals of the day, the ones who believed that they had a corner on truth and particularly the practice of their faith. Jesus was ruthless in his opposition to the view of God these pious men presented. Over the centuries we have cleaned him up so thoroughly that we miss understanding him quite rightly as a relentless rogue. He thumbed his nose at orthodoxy quite rudely, I expect; he dared to go out on his own, showing in every way he could that the religious message of the time was just sickening to him. It was as though he was hellishly mad and utterly unwilling to stand by idly one more second. The gospels tell us that when Jesus looked at how harassed and tired and disheartened his people were, his heart was broken with compassion. Religion, which in the tradition had been the great liberator of God's people, a story of deliverance from slavery in Egypt into the land of promise and goodness, had become complicit in a system that enslaved and took life rather than giving it.

The action of Jesus that was loathed almost more than anything was the way he so freely forgave those who came to him. He went about dining with sinners, talking with adulteresses, and healing the lame and blind and telling them their sins were forgiven. "Outrageous," the religious leaders cried. "Who in the world does he think he is?" red-faced and enraged they asked. His arrogance eroded their power, don't you see? Religious powerbrokers have always been reluctant to mete out forgiveness. Withholding it, making it available only through rigorous penance, like the unyielding maintenance of debt, keeps the penitent or the one in debt in his/her place, while forgiveness, generously given, leads to freedom and spontaneity.

It is an imperfect story, this bizarre parable is, but I believe it points to the extravagance of God's love and certainly to the unwillingness of Jesus to live by a set of rules that kept the rich rich and the poor poor. Jesus systematically went about turning things upside down, not only or even primarily just the tables in the courtyard of the Temple, but the very core of religious thinking at the time. He used the image of debt in talking about forgiveness because he and all those who heard him knew the weight of indebtedness. Two weeks ago I spoke in great detail about the economic reality of the people alongside whom Jesus lived and worked in Galilee. The grind of poverty and debt was heavy and real in the lives of his listeners, and the message he came to give was that relief had finally come. Freedom from sin, freedom from debt—these were astonishing notions to those to whom they were spoken. Even 2000 years later they are powerful for us, too; ours also is a culture that knows the burden of debt, literal debt that grows and grows month after month. While following Jesus won't make that all okay, the metaphor still resonates with us because we know and have seen the burden of debt.

It was radical grace Jesus came to tell about, and I wonder if it truly is any more popular today than it was when he tried to get it across by using this strange and difficult-to-apprehend tale. These may be fighting words for some, but in my heart I believe it: Jesus would be too liberal today for most of his hearers, most of us included. We'd be likely to say his grace was too cheap. In fact, let me get quite personal: Jesus would probably offend my sense of propriety. I love order, our order in particular; I

love decorum and all that goes with it; I prefer emotions that are measured and contained; and worst of all, I have on occasion been heard to say that a little responsible guilt never hurt anyone (that is church talk for saying that forgiveness given too freely may not result in the changed behavior I'd like to see.)

Our prisons are filled with people who are lost to any hope of rehabilitation, lost forever to the harshness of retribution; and our poor, growing at a faster rate than our middle class, are locked in cycles of inferior education and substandard housing, surrounded by more subtle but lingering prejudice. Holding out for them the Horatio Alger myth as the way out of this cycle is blunted and unhelpful; Jesus never suggested exceptionalism as the way out of societal ills. The way to life, he said, was the generous sharing by those who had with those who had not.

My brothers and sisters, I don't know how to make perfect sense of this for me, let alone for anyone else. But I think these words speak to the heart of something very true about the gospel. Jesus showed that Grace is the divine rogue, the gift that gives when there is no justification for it, the gift that is given with regard to no rules, the gift that insists that there are no outcasts, not one single one. And though money is not the only medium we use to negotiate such categories, it is certainly one of them—a very powerful one. And it is one with which we must struggle despite the persistent taboo against talking about it. I can hear my mother saying, "It is just not nice to talk about money."

So, of course, I am as conflicted about money as anyone. But I know it is dangerous stuff—often very wonderful, dangerous stuff that I love, but dangerous nonetheless. Its greatest danger is that it changes the way we see others and even the way we see ourselves; that is to say, it changes or can change the value we attribute to ourselves and to others. What I also know is that it is most dangerous to us when we are afraid to give any of it away.

Listen carefully, and you can hear the groan. Here it comes: the annual or semi-annual or quarterly sermon about giving. Don't stop listening, for I believe these words are more about living than they are about giving. I believe God wants us to give; I truly do. I believe it is good for us; it is good for our children to see us giving and good for them to give themselves. Here is a take-home point: what God asks of us is usually good for us. Tithing—don't get hung up on the word; we are not biblical literalists; you decide what your tithe is—got started when settled agriculture took the place of nomadic wandering. It quickly became apparent that if there was going to be a crop next year, some of this year's harvest had to be saved for seed. If everything were eaten up this year, if everything were about taking out and nothing about putting back, the whole process would collapse. That principle applies to all of life. If we are not putting back at least some percentage of what we are taking out, we are takers, and the result will be depleted lives and a depleted world.

But here is the real zinger and the part we are often too afraid to preach: Whether we give or not, we are the recipients of God's roguish grace, grace that follows no rules, grace that in fact we'd say has pretty low standards. We are loved because we are, not because we earn it by giving. I may love you more for giving, but God doesn't: God loves you and me and all of us just for being. It is utterly shameless, and it is the most amazing reality in the world.

In the name of God: *Amen.*