



Service or Servitude?

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Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 16:1-13

Well it's good to be back from my time away with family as we welcomed our newest addition – Soren. We are all doing well & I am grateful to this congregation. It is incredible to come back and witness all that you have done to care for one another, feed our neighbors, learn and grow in prayer and faith. So Thank You!

I learned a very important lesson upon my return to Faith. Read through the scripture BEFORE agreeing to preach. Lol. OOF huh? This scripture from Luke is NOT easy. *SLIDE* As I began my study of this passage, the first thing I read began ...

“Commentators routinely remark that the parable of the dishonest manager stands among the most challenging texts in the New Testament, often regarding it as the most perplexing of Jesus’ parables.”

Great! I inadvertently signed up for a doozy. I mean, I think most of us read this passage of Luke and think, “What?!?!?! Why is he commended for being shrewd? Isn't he dishonest? Why did Jesus even tell this story?” This passage isn't one we go to when we need a word of encouragement. At least I certainly don't, I'm not sure about you...

But another thing I've learned is how the fullness of the human experience is captured in the Bible. *SLIDE* I've had the privilege of participating in our synod's Leadership Cohort for Deacon's and pastors – and every month we dig into scripture for our own curiosity and learning. There is a LOT in the Bible. Stories of misogynist violence, murder, war, sexual assault, demon possession, impoverished families left behind, and more suffering than I'd like to admit.

Messy stories FILL the Bible, so we can't faithfully JUST throw them ALL out or skip over them. ... We sometimes want everything in the Bible to be an instruction book for life. But scripture is so much more than a book of rules – it is filled with history, poetry



& prayers, letters, prophecies, and more. I truly believe that God speaks to us through the Bible, even if all scripture isn't instructional. There are lessons to learn and words of hope to glean in the midst of challenging narratives and perplexing passages. One of the tasks of the preacher is to find and proclaim the good news in the text.

SLIDE

So friends, where do you hear good news in the words from Luke read by _____ today?

In this story, where is there hope for you or for all of us?

I don't have any magical insight of what Jesus was trying to teach in this parable. And to be honest – I don't really think there is a "right" answer – like this is a puzzle to be solved. But I can find good news.

I wonder, what was this experience like for the debtor who had 20% of their remaining balance erased? Or for the borrower whose debt was slashed in half? Would this not be absolutely good news? I would be surprised if anyone listening right now has NEVER been in some sort of debt situation. Debts can hold us hostage and keep us from living freely.

Debt has been part of my life too. Medical bills, student loans, car payments, and credit card debt have weighed me down. There was a time years ago that looking at bills every month brought me to tears, trying to figure out how to divide the limited funds across the bills that I couldn't pay in full. I vividly remember receiving the news that a large portion of my medical debt had been forgiven after I'd been paying on it for years. It was such relief. The weight of that debt was overwhelming. What a gift for it to simply be released. I'm afraid far too many of us know how powerful debts are in our lives. And isn't this like the God who forgives us after years of failure? Who lets us start over with the gift of new life? Doesn't God also release us inexplicably from the weights we carry?

You see, debts hold us captive. They control us. And demand that we attend to them. Whether for the person living paycheck to paycheck, or the rich business person sending overdue notices again and again and again – debt demands we serve it.



SLIDE

And this kind of service isn't the kind we do to love and care for others. That's diakonia. Here in Luke, it is douleia (doo-li'-ah). This is slavery. Control. This is a yoke of servitude.

So in this story – I hear and see good news. The weight of slavery has been lightened for the debtors and the rich man alike – who are both controlled by worldly resources in different ways. The liberation goes in both directions – and is not based on being deserving. In all the confusion of this story, one thing is CLEAR. The statement that ends our reading today – “You cannot be a slave to God and wealth.”

The release from debts opens us up to be yoked to God in discipleship. For we have had SO much forgiven in God's love. We have received release from all that seeks to control us – wealth, sin, and the ways of this fallen world. God has released us from all that distracts us from diakonia ... serving God out of love.

And to me, this is fantastic news. This reminds me that there is hope for me yet. There is hope for each of us who find ourselves in servitude to something – anything other than the life-giving power of God's lovingkindness.

Maybe for you, the good news of this complicated parable is something completely different! And that is just fine. God speaks hope into our lives in different ways and with different messages. Praise God for the living power of these holy scriptures speaking into our lives today!

SLIDE

In closing, I want to thank all of you who have allowed the Spirit to speak to you through the holy scriptures over these past months and have produced some artwork. Please take some time to view our incredible art exhibit based on scripture. Maybe the passage today didn't say much to you, but 33 individuals and groups have graciously shared an artistic expression of how they have encountered God in the Bible. May you find good news in both the words and visual expressions of the Holy Scriptures.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.