

Every commentary I've read on today's parable names it a challenge. Episcopal Priest, Father Capon has books on all the parables and agrees this is the hardest. But Capon won't go for any watering of it down or making it easy – like Jesus wouldn't say such a thing. The Bible says he did say such a thing, so we listen all the more.

Pastor Garness-Holmes suggests writing on this parable in pencil, not ink. Reminds me of Rainer Maria Rilke's urging to *love the difficult questions* trusting insight will come along in due time.

The problem with today's story is it seems to condone deception, and today, there's far too much of that. We're tired of deception. But what if this isn't about deception – not even about the manager, but about Jesus? What if Jesus tells this parable on himself – as a mirror on his own life?

Jesus turns everything we've been taught upside down – showing us the wiser winning is done by losing, that real life opens as we die to ourselves, that gains are mostly made by giving. This is so topsy-turvy that it can look deceptive – throwing rules to the wind, challenging our long-held logic.

Having finally after all these years spent time loving this parable instead of pushing it aside, I'm now thinking something I've never thought – that this might be the most important parable Jesus told. And that if this was the only parable we had from Jesus, it might be enough.

I've not thought this before, but this parable now has me excited – and excited especially to be among you at Lutheran Church of the Master.

I've been connected with LCM close to 7 years now. We've been through a lot – not least a global pandemic changing not only how *we* operate, but how the world operates. New things have become commonplace – like Zoom being a household word, and lines like *be sure to mute or unmute*. Or “are you boosted?” We never use to ask that.

Change is affecting faith communities in particular. Articles call church and synagogue survival into question. “Nobody will care about religious community once it's out of our habit.”

But there are also countering articles suggesting faith communities mean as much as ever – people choosing engagement out of refreshed valuing. There's truth in both of these views. ½ empty & ½ full are the same cup.

And I want you to hear today that I'm going with the ½ full view. I see these as especially good days to be the church! These days are causing fresh questioning around what we're really about – who this is by whose name we call ourselves Christians. Who is this Christ figure? What does it really mean to follow in his ways? – which gets us back to our parable.

What if Jesus uses today's parable to show us who he really is – to mirror how God is turning things upside down and sideways? We can take offense at Jesus commending the dishonest manager, but what this manager did for those in debt what God in Christ does daily for us?

Instead of getting for himself, Jesus gave away his very life. Jesus loved those who didn't love him back. He showed mercy upon mercy. He didn't reserve grace just for the deserving.

Jesus was a lousy bookkeeper – kept no track of offenses. He forgave and called us to do the same. He never said, *forgive when it's fair*. He taught us to pray, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive those indebted to us.”

Jesus was surely annoying. He ate with people others avoided. He elevated the least and the last. He brought home the lost. He welcomed stranger after stranger. He hung out with the contagious and despised. He invited the poor to every party. Drinks were always on him. Just look at the Eucharist. It's all gift.

I'm taken by the possibility of Jesus telling this odd parable on himself. In doing so, he helps us know him better; helps us catch on to how counter-cultural it is to follow him in our own lives. Jesus shows us that God Almighty is toward us as this odd manager was – giving away the store for our sakes that we may be set free to do so for one another.

Today's parable tells in story form what Jesus shows in his flesh and blood – a God who gives far more than we can begin to get our heads around – a God who redraws lines always out of love of neighbor.

My friend and colleague Pastor Steve Herder of Ascension, Thousand Oaks, serves on the board of Jubilee USA – an organization calling for debt reduction where the world’s vulnerable are starving because of debt.

I think Jesus would be on that board too. Jesus was into debt reduction – into throwing out the scorekeeping books – the tit for tat. If someone is hungry, don’t exact from them, feed them, and love them.

Jesus shows us a God who doesn’t throw out rules but restores rules to their purpose – safeguarding the vulnerable. That’s what rules are for – ensuring the powerful don’t wipe all out the rest.

Jesus shows us a God who turns life on end, not with anger or shame, but with joyful generosity. And there’s no entrance fee to God’s love-party which begins now, not just when we die. The Eucharist sends us to live this way now.

But here’s the thing. It involves catching this crazy vision of a great turn around. Life isn’t about figuring out how to win but discovering more and more what it means that we’ve been forever won.

This is what I see us up to at LCM, and I’m so glad. We want to be a part of God’s great turn-around toward inclusive love of neighbor. Thank you for your part in this dance.

*Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn.*

Amen