

Pentecost 17C  
Sept. 19 2010  
Pastor Tim Koester

## Unrighteous forgiveness is still Forgiveness!

*(We begin with a lecture)*

No one can worship God and wealth. The prophet Amos knew it and Jesus knew it. We had better know it too. So what better day than today to confront the idolatry of money that plagues our society. What better day than today to remember that Luke begins his gospel by saying "the hungry will be filled with good things but the rich will be sent away empty." What better day than today to stand up to the rampant materialism that enslaves many of you here today because you think happiness is found in the latest new thing to buy. The poor of the world suffer and in some cases die and yet other people can't wait for the next sale to come along so they can buy more stuff. The church receives fewer and fewer dollars yet new homes are built, new boats cruise the river, new cars sit in garages, and new equipment goes to the field. What better day than today...

*(Shelli comes to the pulpit and whispers some things in my ear)*

What? ... Really! Umm...well... It seems that there is a new car in **our** garage. "And we bought that?" Wow, I really should have looked ahead at the texts that were coming up before we did that. Maybe *today isn't such a good day to talk about money. It's going to be harder than I thought to use guilt as a motivator*, especially when I'm as guilty as anybody. You know about guilt don't you: *they say it's the gift that just keeps on giving.*

But judging by what I'm feeling right now, I think I would disagree. Guilt seems to **take** something from you. It takes away your courage, your happiness, and your joy. Surely there is a more powerful, more life-giving word from our texts today than guilt! Making people feel guilty might put a little more in the offering plate in the short term, but it has no power in the long term to **truly transform our lives**. That only happens when we are **free** from guilt and shame and resentment. How can a dishonest manager possibly demonstrate how that can happen?

That's a question many people have struggled with as they have tried to unravel the strange sayings of Jesus in this text. To our modern sensibilities, it seems absurd that a business owner would commend an employee for collecting less money than what was owed. Jesus tells this story to make a point for his listeners but what exactly does the steward do that Jesus wants us to see? I think it is simply this:

**Forgiving debts is more important than collecting debts.** This is Not business as usual and that is the point. **Forgiveness has the power to create new possibilities**, even in the middle of a crisis that seems to have no way out.

Look again at the parable. A personal representative for a large estate has apparently done something that is going to get himself fired. "Now what?" he asks. Every alternative available is a dead end. So he comes up with a plan that actually creates a new alternative. He forgives the debts owed to the estate.

It's a first century **bailout** targeted to the little guy! The not-so-well off renters who work the land have piled up huge debts to the estate and when some of those debts are forgiven (even because of dishonest and unrighteous motivation) a whole lot of **good will is created**. The manager looks good in the eyes of the people and as a personal representative of the owner, the owner looks good as well. You can almost imagine the talk around town about how generous and honorable this rich man is and in Jesus' day, honor was more important than wealth. Sarah Dylan Breuer, theologian and priest, puts it this way:

"The steward's only commendable action is that he forgives debts. The steward forgives. He forgives things that he had no right to forgive. He forgives for all the wrong reasons, for personal gain and to compensate for past misconduct. But forgiveness is the decisive action he undertakes to redeem himself from a position that seems to have no good ending.

This complicated, confusing and difficult story, which is unique to the gospel of Luke, emphasizes one of the central themes for Luke: **FORGIVE**. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no reason at all.

Remember, Luke is the guy whose version of the "Lord's Prayer" literally reads "forgive us our sins as we forgive our debtors" (Luke 11:4). If you've wondered where those different versions of the Lord's Prayer comes from, "sins," "debts," "trespasses" -- Luke is at least partly responsible. When it comes to forgiveness, he seems to treat monetary debts in the same way as moral offenses. Luke constantly raises this point: **the arrival of the kingdom of God is no occasion for score-keeping of any kind**, whether monetary or moral.

The matter of forgiveness is central to Jesus. Why forgive someone who's sinned against us, or against our sense of what is obviously right? We don't have to do it out of love for the other person, if we're not there yet.

We could forgive the other person because of that that's what we pray in Jesus' name every Sunday morning, and because we know we'd like forgiveness ourselves.

We could forgive because we've experienced what **we** are like as unforgiving people; we know that refusing to forgive [because we don't want the other person to benefit] is something like eating rat

poison hoping it will hurt the rat. Refusing to forgive usually festers a poison inside of us.

We could forgive because we are, or we want to be, deeply in touch with a sense of Jesus' power to forgive and free sinners like us. Or we could forgive because we think it will improve our odds of winning the lottery.

It all boils down to the same thing: deluded or sane, selfish and/or unselfish, there is no bad reason to forgive. Extending the kind of grace God shows us in every possible arena -- financial and moral -- can only put us more deeply in touch with God's grace."<sup>1</sup>

So perhaps there is no better day than today to let this truth sink deep into our souls: **Forgiving debts, even financial debts, is more important than collecting debts.** In fact, forgiving financial debts might just be the "little things" we need to be faithful in so that we are able to then forgive the much more important and lasting debts we accrue in our relationships.

At some point, God comes to us for an accounting of our stewardship, like the master to the Unjust Steward, and like him we are found as a less than ideal manager. None of us has the ability to love like God expects. All of us must rely on God's good grace but when we find ourselves in a crisis situation, can we learn from the creative power unleashed by someone like an Unjust Steward?

Do we discover that the key to going on with our lives can be found in the forgiving of debts, in the rebuilding of relationships with fellow debtors?

Even the master in the parable can see the wisdom in that. Can the children of light? We can -when we hold fast to the promise that on the cross, Jesus has already gained forgiveness for the debts none of us can ever repay. Let that power unclench our fists so that on this day we may indeed worship God our creator and redeemer with open hands ready to do God's work in the world. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> This section taken from Sarah Dylan Breuer's Lectionary blog  
[http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/09/proper\\_20\\_year\\_.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/09/proper_20_year_.html)