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## *When the Bible Won't Cooperate*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa  
Proper 20 – Year C**

Sometimes, the Bible just won't cooperate. Sometimes, it just won't say what we want it to, or what we think it should say. Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we just can't clean up its ambiguities or soften its offenses. I know, because I have tried. I have tried to make this parable make sense, to find its meaning, or at least to make it less scandalous. And it just wouldn't cooperate. It still won't.

So here I am, and here we are, as befuddled as Jesus' first disciples when he turns to them and tells them about a rich man who hears that his manager has been squandering his property. The rich man summons his manager, demands an accounting, and dismisses him.

The manager thinks fast and comes up with a plan to ensure his future by ingratiating himself to his master's debtors. He executes it with the skill of a criminal mastermind, summoning the debtors one by one, so there are no witnesses, and no accountability as they drop their scruples. He has the debtors write down the new amount, so it's in their handwriting. It's their fingerprints on the pen. With the stroke of a pen, a debt of a hundred jugs of olive oil becomes fifty. A hundred containers of wheat, eighty. These are big amounts, mind you! He does all this, not for any greater good that we can see, but to protect his own hide and make sure it has a place to sit at the end of the day.

And his master commends him. What? Did we hear that right? Sure enough, that's what it says: "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." In the same sentence, this manager is called "dishonest" *and* commended. For acting shrewdly. Then follows a string of sayings that are as cryptic and confusing as the story, like, "The children of light could learn from the shrewdness of children of this age." "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth."

Now, that makes no sense! That is a problem! It's a problem, especially if you expect the Bible to give straight answers and clear moral instructions. It's a problem if you think you're supposed to like and imitate its characters, and expect them to be "good" people: innocent and trusting, not shrewd. Not concerned with money, except to give it away, expecting nothing in return. Not worrying about their life, or what they'll eat or wear. Not really concerned with self at all, but rather with the common good and others. And definitely not trying to buy friends, or hustle their way into the eternal home of heaven, or secure their own salvation. Is Jesus telling us to be like *that*?

I can hear Martin Luther's *Nein!* all the way from the grave. *Beware the idea of storing up good works to expedite your entry into heaven, he would say; that's how we got the selling and buying of indulgences! Beware works righteousness! Beware self-interest and impure motives! Beware of relying on yourself or on wealth. Put your faith in God alone, and in God's grace.*

Yes, it's a problem, if on top of everything else, you still have Luther ringing in your ears. Protestant interpreters have tried to tackle the problem by cleaning up the steward's character and reconciling it with their expectations. That money he slashed off the debts? That was his commission! He was giving up his commission. Or it was interest: he was knocking off the interest that had accrued through the unrighteous practice of usury. Except that there's nothing in the text to suggest this. Except that there seems to be no mathematical formula governing his debt relief.

Fine. Then he was righting a wrong. He was breaking the rules of an unfair game. He was a first-century

Robinhood, stealing from the rich to give to the poor. Except that the debtors are not exactly poor, and the manager expects them to become beholden to him, as well as to his master.

This parable just won't cooperate. It just won't say what we think it should. So what if we set that project aside and try taking it at face value, with its dishonest, self-serving protagonist, who is commended for his shrewdness. That is not to imply that we are going to arrive at the definitive answer today. I'm still working on this parable. Or rather, it's still working on me. I suspect, and hope, that it's still working on you, too.

Though we may not have the puzzle-of-the-parable fully solved, we recognize something familiar and honest here, don't we? It's true that we live with imperfect situations, imperfect systems, imperfect solutions, imperfect people with imperfect motives. It's true that we are imperfect people ourselves: that our motives are mixed. That we serve our own interests even as we serve others'. How often have you realized after helping someone, "I got more out of that than they did!" Sometimes, of course, it's also true that the reward comes later, much later. Indeed, that's the hope that frees us to make sacrifices today. To give and serve in risky ways.

And therein lies the grace. Time and again, Jesus appeals to the self-serving, self-preserving instincts of his listeners, and works with them. If you want to gain your life, he says in so many words, you may have to be willing to lose it for my sake. If you want all these things, strive first for the kingdom of God, and the important things will be given you. If you want to be entrusted with the true riches, be faithful with the dishonest—or less true—wealth of the world. If you want to receive what is your own, be faithful with what you have before you, right here, right now.

"Grace heals and elevates nature; it does not obliterate it." "Grace works with our nature, not against it." So says Catholic theologian Gary Anderson. He goes on to say that "Any account of our moral life must begin with who we are as embodied beings. In this respect we must confess that built into our very DNA is the aspiration for self-preservation and self-fulfillment." These are not necessarily bad things either! God created us for life, and calls us to life! Of course, sin and fear and greed distort that, but Jesus doesn't give up. Instead, in grace, he takes "the primal fears we all share about what the future may bring and converts them into actions in service of others," as Anderson says.<sup>[1]</sup>

With that, this parable shifts our focus away from the ambiguous morality of the actor and toward the nature of God, and God's grace, and God's economy, that is, the real, divine economy in which self-interest and other-interest are not mutually exclusive. In which our relationship to money and wealth is complicated and fraught with spiritual danger, *and* also imbued with spiritual possibility.

It's the true economy that operates with different values, and nurtures and rewards good, and rights wrongs. Where we, like the steward, can count on a future: a just future in which good deeds, or bad deeds, count. They matter.

It's the ultimate economy in which we can invest in eternal life and ultimate things, in which we can work toward salvation—not as a way of trying to be God ourselves or to control God—but because of God's grace. Because this is God's world, and we are God's people, and God meets us where we are and uses all things for good.

[1] Gary Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in Biblical Tradition* (Yale University, 2013), 68 – 69.