

“THE TERRIBLE PARABLE”

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2016

Text: Luke 16:1-13

Justice and mercy are not quite the same thing.

Justice means giving people what they deserve.

Mercy means giving people more and better than they deserve.

Justice is a good thing because it fulfills what is required.

Mercy is an incredible thing, because it goes beyond what is required.

Evil is awful. Where there is no justice, evil rules. People take what is not theirs and do not repay. People hurt others without penalty. Evil is despicable.

Justice improves the situation of a world full of evil. Justice restores the equilibrium in society, by satisfying people.

Mercy does not merely restore equilibrium. Mercy restores peace. Mercy does not settle for satisfying people. Mercy gives life to people.

What does the Lord require of you, but 1) to do justice, 2) to love mercy, 3) and to walk humbly with your God? Notice: do justice, but love mercy.

Today's terrible parable puzzles us until we remember that justice and mercy are so different as to be practically antithetical. Jesus tells us a story in which a businessman praises his manager for defrauding him in order to make friends with people who owe him money. Jesus praises him, and then Jesus encourages us to act the same: “But I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest

wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Why does Jesus encourage us to lie, cheat, and defraud? He doesn't. He is simply driving home a point about a remarkable authority that we have, as members of the Body of Christ, as disciples of Jesus Christ. We have power to forgive sins. Which means we have the power to give people something that doesn't actually belong to us. That's right. We have the power to give people something that doesn't actually belong to us!

The power to forgive sins is not a birthright of people. Sure, we can let people off the hook for what they do to us. We can decline to get justice. We can excuse them. But what we cannot do is make excuses for them . . . to God. “Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” the people asked in Capernaum the first time Jesus said to someone “Your sins are forgiven.” Well, Jesus showed them he wasn't kidding by telling the man to stand up, pick up his bed, and carry it home. The people were amazed. They believed that Jesus must indeed also have the power to forgive sins. God must have given him that power!

Later, of course, after the resurrection, Jesus would breathe the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and the church, and bestow that same power upon us. The power to forgive sins. The power to cancel debts that are owed not to us but to God. We can wipe people's slates clean.

You know that you cannot make anyone else forgive another person. You can suggest it, advise it, etc. But you cannot make me or anyone else forgive someone against whom we are holding a grudge.

Not possible. Forgiveness has to come from inside us, or it is not forgiveness.

And yet, we have the power to “make” God forgive the sins of others, because Jesus has given us God’s Holy Spirit to do just that. He has empowered us to do that.

Mercy is the signature feature of the kingdom of God, of which you and I are members! And mercy forgives. Mercy says “You owe, but never mind.” Which is what the manager did in the terrible parable of Jesus. To the fellow who owed one hundred jugs of olive oil he said, “Let’s call it fifty.” And to the person who owed one hundred containers of wheat he said, “Eighty will be fine.” He liberated them from serious, honest debt. And he did it with authority which had been given to him by the owner. He did those customers a huge favor. He gave them something they did not have coming. What he did was not fair, not just. But it was not less than justice but went beyond justice.

That is a good picture of God’s character, since our God’s delight is not to punish, not to collect debts, but to forgive.

(Notice that I am switching back and forth between the words sins and debts. We could also throw in trespasses or offenses. There is common ground among these. They all describe transactions which disturb the equilibrium of a relationship in a bad way.)

Throughout the Bible we see a world filled with sin and a God who is struggling and striving to save the world from that. First, by trying to get us to satisfy the demands of justice. But because we are not petty offenders and because our self-interest is so strong, we need more than that. We are going to have to be redeemed. Someone is going to have to pay more than he should have to. Someone is going to have to give. Someone is going to have to be merciful to us. And in Christ, God is just that way.

Titus 1:15: The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the foremost. Which is to say: the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to cancel the debts of people, and to stamp that cancellation all over us. To rescue us from the economics of sin and bring us into an economy of salvation. We are in debt to God up to our eyeballs for all we have done; Jesus says, “Take your bill and write zero.”

Not just. Merciful.

And now that we have received mercy, we have become children of mercy. Jesus may not have given us his power to make the blind see, but he has bestowed on all God’s people the power to be merciful.

Which means to forgive the sins of others. As managers of God’s people, “A royal priesthood” Peter calls it, we can say “Take your bill and write zero.”

This is not only about sins, of course. As people in the real world we try to do justice, of course, but we love mercy, and so in every area of our life we find ourselves invested with divine power to give people what they do not deserve.

For example, this is what we do at the food pantries. That is why they are a wonderful signature ministry of our congregation. We aren’t giving people anything expecting them to do something in return. We are not giving people what they deserve. We are giving people what they do not deserve, for free. It is not less than justice; it is not justice; it is compassion and mercy. And we do it because we believe that we ourselves have received from God’s mercy absolutely everything we have. Our eyes and ears, all the parts of our bodies, our minds, our houses, our families, our time on this planet, the fellowship we have with other people, our vocations, any and

everything that makes us happy, plus the forgiveness of our sins.

I invite you to consider what I jokingly referred to as a “terrible parable” not as a terrifying word about the necessity of committing fraud to buy heaven. But as a terribly exciting word about how we have been empowered by a merciful God, marked with the cross of Christ, so that within this world, darkened by sin and only a little bit brightened by justice, we can glow with mercy and forgiveness, brightening people’s lives and lightening their loads.

Against the powers of sin and guilt and obligation, you and I have strength which is not our own. When we live according to that strength, God is with us.

Amen.

