

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year C

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No doubt, this story we've just heard in the gospel today is a story that was told by Jesus himself. And this story has puzzled people from the very moment Luke wrote it down and passed it on to the church because it's so difficult to understand.

Most of us here today are honest, or at least make every effort to be honest. I don't know about you, but I resent the fact that Jesus seems to commend a dishonest steward for his actions.

And remember that story Jesus told about the man who realizes that a great treasure lies buried in a field belonging to someone else? He goes off and buys the field to get the treasure for himself. Unethical and dishonest? Probably. Smart? Yes, that sneaky man gains the treasure.

Jesus told many stories about scoundrels, or at least unsavory people, who benefit from their dishonesty. But his audience—the poor people of the Middle East—would have loved his stories about cleverness winning out over the “big guys.”

This week I've pored over many commentaries to try to figure out what on earth to say about this parable. Out of everything I read, I found the work of Kenneth E. Bailey the most convincing. He has spent his career as a scholar studying scripture in its cultural context. What would the original listeners of these stories have heard and understood? What are we supposed to make of this parable?

I'm convinced that we have to have that cultural context in order to move past our distaste for this dishonest manager and to find out what Jesus was saying to his listeners and to us in the telling of this parable. So the interpretation that follows is based on the work of Kenneth Bailey and his attention the story in the light of the culture of Jesus' time.

We're going to enter into this story by being the audience for a talk show. I'm the talk show host.



Catherine with Clarence (manager), Helmut (rich man), Mike (renter)

Catherine : I'd like to welcome Helmut Linne von Berg, the rich man, Clarence Kunstmann, the dishonest manager, and Mike Newman, the renter, to the St Peter's Today Show. (Applause from the audience as guests gather at the front of the church and take their seats on bar stools.)

Catherine: We all know about the recent scandal that has rocked Port Royal. Our good friend, Helmut, the richest man in town, who owns a grand estate, has been cheated by his manager. Not only that, but the manager has sucked others in this town into his dishonesty. The rumor mill in Port Royal has been grinding away, so let's get to the bottom of this mess.

Helmut, why did you fire your manager, Clarence?

Helmut: I've been hearing a steady stream of things from my renters about how dishonest Clarence has been. I've been hearing these things for a long time.

So I called Clarence in, and asked him specifically about the things I've been hearing about him. I asked him to turn in the record books, and I fired him on the spot when he didn't give me any answers.

Catherine: Clarence, I'm curious about why you didn't try to defend yourself when Helmut brought these charges against you. Why didn't you argue with him and insist that you were innocent? Or you could have blamed everyone else. You could even have blamed Helmut.

Clarence: I was caught fair and square. OK, so I was guilty. And Helmut had figured out that I was cheating him. Helmut expects obedience, and I knew he was going to judge me for what I'd done. So it wouldn't matter even if I'd argued with him and tried to talk him into letting me keep my job. He wasn't going to let me have my job back.

Catherine: Helmut, is this true?

Helmut: Yes, I do expect obedience and honesty from the people who work for me. I felt I had no choice but to fire the steward.

Catherine: It seems to me that you would have at least lectured Clarence, or even had him locked up for what he did. You just told him he was fired and let him go. It seems to me that really, in this situation you acted with a great amount of mercy and generosity toward Clarence.

Clarence: This is true. I was relieved not to be hauled off to jail immediately. I had some time to think about what I could do to save myself.

Catherine: Clarence, what were you thinking as you walked out the door after being fired?

Clarence: First of all, I was shocked and relieved that Helmut didn't immediately have me hauled off to jail! And my second thought was to figure out how I'd manage now that my job was definitely gone. I thought about taking up hard labor, even though educated people like me don't do those sorts of jobs. But I'm not strong enough to survive that kind of life. And begging—even though people do it, I just couldn't bring myself to do that.

Catherine: So what else came to mind?

Clarence: Well, I figured that no one in this town would hire me when the whole truth got out, and already people had their suspicions—after all, some of the people in this town squealed on me to begin with! This whole thing was going to destroy my public image.

Catherine: So what was next for you?

Clarence: Well, I figured that if Helmut hadn't already had me hauled off to jail, I had nothing to lose. I had to act before the word got out about Helmut firing me, and you know how fast word travels in this town!

Catherine: So what did you decide to do?

Clarence: On my way to get the books to turn in to Helmut, I had a brilliant idea.

Catherine: So, Mike, can you tell us what happened next?

Mike: Clarence called us together. We didn't know he'd been fired, so we figured he had a message for us from Helmut. We all rent our fields and houses from Helmut, and we'd never want to get on Helmut's bad side. So we showed up to find out what Helmut had on his mind.

Catherine: And then what happened?

Mike: Well, the situation was very odd. Instead of talking to us as a group, Clarence called us in one by one. He made us look at our bills to Helmut and change them in our favor. The bills weren't due yet, we didn't have to pay until harvest time. He seemed to be in a big hurry, and wasn't friendly to us at all.

Catherine: Clarence, what was going on in your mind at this point?

Clarence: I knew I had to be fast, so I told them to write quickly. I had to beat this town's rumor mill. If the renters had any idea that I'd been fired, they would never have done what I was asking and put their relationship with Helmut at risk. They would never be dishonest toward the master.

Catherine: So you'd say that the Helmut and the renters have a good relationship?

Clarence: Yes, Helmut cares deeply about his renters, and the renters respect Helmut and depend on him. So I had to act fast to get my plan to work out.

Mike: Exactly. We figured that you were still in authority. You didn't give us any time to think it through so we figured that Helmut himself had authorized this changing of the bills and that you had talked him into it. We figured that Helmut had approved it, otherwise we never would have done what we did. We'd never take a chance like that.

Catherine: Were you surprised by the offer?

Mike: Yes, we figured that Clarence had talked Helmut into giving us a bonus. We've had so much rain this year that the fields flooded, and the crops haven't done as well as usual, so we thought that Clarence had intervened on our behalf to get our debts reduced. It felt like Christmas in September to me! I was really happy about the whole thing, and very grateful to Clarence for acting in my behalf. We didn't even have to ask for this reduction! Clarence just graciously offered it to us!

Catherine: What a convoluted dilemma! Then what happened?

Clarence: After everyone had changed their bills, I gathered everything up and took it all to Helmut.

Helmut: When I looked at the bills, a few things became obvious to me. I had no doubt that all of my renters were already celebrating because they were so thankful for my generosity!

So, I could either go to them, say that the whole thing was a mistake, that I'd just fired Clarence, and that this reduction in the bills was null and void.

Or, I could keep silent, accept all this praise, and let Clarence benefit from all of the enthusiasm generated by his tricks.

Really, I am a very generous man. I didn't jail Clarence. And now look at what he's done! Stolen even more from me! In the end, though, I have to give Clarence credit for being pretty smart.

Catherine: Clarence, what made you think you'd get away with this plan?

Clarence: Well, I know that Helmut is generous and merciful, and that in the end, he'd pay the price and take the loss so that I could have a future.

For me, things were hopeless. And I had only one thing going for me, the generosity of Helmut.

Catherine: (Turning toward the audience) So—what does this story mean for us?

If the rich man is like God, we can see from this story that God is a God both of judgment and of mercy. At the end of time, we will be judged.

Clarence, you're caught up in a crisis. God's kingdom has come, you've been judged, and you have failed miserably. You have no option but to trust in God's mercy, trusting that Helmut will pay the price for you to be saved from certain disaster and ruin.

And all of us who have just heard this story need the same kind of wisdom you have—to depend on God's mercy in the face of judgment.

But I'm still puzzled over one thing. Helmut, why did you give this rascal Clarence any credit at all? After all, he was dishonest and he stole even more from you to feather his own nest. Why the praise?

Helmut: I praised Clarence for knowing that he could trust in my mercy, not because of his dishonesty.

Catherine: So what are we to take from this event that has kept this town gossiping for weeks?

Helmut: I'd say that this scandal has revealed to you the merciful nature of God. And let's face it. None of you present here today, and in the town of Port Royal, measure up to God's standards. On Judgment Day, all of you would be condemned. And so, to trust in God's mercy is ultimately your only option.

Clarence: Yes, take that option. Trust in God's mercy when it's your turn to be judged.

Catherine: So when Jesus told a story like this to his disciples, he wasn't praising dishonesty?

Helmut: Right. That's why the next verses in Luke's gospel are about money. God wants us to use our money to create and maintain honest, helpful and merciful relationships with one another, instead of using what we have as a way of separating and dividing ourselves from each other.

Catherine: I wish we could explore that part of the story a little more, but our time is up. We'll hear more about those verses next week on the St Peter's Today Show. Thank you for being our guests and reminding us that even though "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under God's table," that we can trust in God's manifold and great mercies to each and every one of us, now and always.

References:

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