

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 23, 2007  
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*And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly*  
Luke 16:8

No parable is an easy read. Sometimes the stories seem simple enough, like the prodigal son (we all know about sons or daughters who are wasteful), or the women who searches for a lost coin (who wouldn't do that?), or the shepherd who is missing one of his flock (after all we are talking about a money producing possession, here). But then, in the way Jesus uses these simple stories, they get complicated because they tend to offend those who are listening to the stories. He uses them to make point, doesn't he? When their meaning seeps out to us, and shocked into awareness, we begin to realize that we just might have to reevaluate our lives. It is very much like raising children. Quite often they are not easy to read. Especially when they are young. They will surprise us, almost, at every turn.

I have a nine month old grandson. He is a joy to watch and to be with, I could do it for hours, partly because he is so unpredictable. If you remember what it is like to be with a child of that age, you know what I mean. His growth happens so quickly. One minute he is absorbed with some plaything, the next moment he wants your attention, the next moment he is crying for food or because his diaper needs changing, or God knows why! When he is crying at night you don't know what's going on. It took me a while to read him! Parables are like that.

Now he is at the stage where he can pull himself up and stand, and then he doesn't know what to do next. That means, of course, he could fall down and bump his head and cry. And that

happens. And now we have a new learning about taking the knocks that life gives you when life comes at you too fast.. Interesting, you know! I find that along with him I am growing too. I question. What does it mean now that I am a grandparent? I want to keep him safe, but I can't always. I want to be there when he takes his first steps the way I was with my son, but I probably won't be there. He will, after all, bump his head and hurt himself. Life goes on! And as it does, I am sure he will play for the Red Sox or the New England Patriots, or get elected to some lofty position in government or social circles. That's our fantasy, of course. But, some of his growing pains may include the times he disappoints others. Will he disappoint his parents, or my wife, or me? What will we do then? Raising children can be like struggling with a parable. They can be confusing, but in the end they are a joy.

Recently after a visit to our grandson's home in the East, I was reflecting on these experiences with friends of ours. They told me about an incident, a charming one, with their young son, who one day found himself in a real jam with his parents. He had seriously offended his parents, he had been scolded, and was then sent to his room. After a while, they heard him crying at the top of the stairs. They looked up and saw their son, who was sobbing, and crying out, saying, "Isn't someone going to hug me?" That's a tough one, if you are a parent and feeling angry at your child. What do you do?

On his part, he is taking a risk. He knows his parents are mad and disappointed with him. Does he have the right to expect them to be soft and tender towards him? That was pretty risky, on his part. So it was a surprised situation all around. But they concluded that he knew them better than they thought. They rushed up the stairs to embrace him.

Parables are like that. They begin and end in unpredictable ways. Today's parable is a tough one. The way I want to point out today is that it teaches us important lesson about trusting mercy when it counts. It tells us about a manager, who knew about his boss what our friends' son knew about his parents. Jesus is telling his audience not to miss out on understanding this same thing about God.

In our parable today, the steward is caught "squandering" his master's money. He is in big trouble and decides to act quickly and decisively. And he does. He decides to reduce the debts owed the master. Is he being dishonest again? How can he be praised for that? But in the parable, we are told he is congratulated for his shrewdness.. *And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.* That seems understandable. We have the misdeeds of the steward, the fact that he is caught, and his decision to get out of this jam, likely in a dishonest way. And then he gets praised.

Here is where we have to remember something about parables. They are not straight line thinking. Point A does not necessarily lead to point B. The good guys do not get the bad guys. There are no heroes on white horses. The bad guys don't always go to jail. But Jesus used images that were less than ideal, even unjust or corrupt ones, just to make his point, and they always shock his listeners, and sometimes us when we understand the situation. They are not about us, so much as about who God is. Remember the prodigal son? It is not so much about the bad son but about the loving father who shows mercy and thanksgiving for his son's return, maybe at the top of the stairs!

In Luke's story about Jesus, and in this parable, we have a world where God does not exact punishment but gives time, and God cancels debts even in the midst of human misbehaving and scheming. Luke offers us a contrast. Not a world of rigidity about rules and control for power at other's expense, not a world that operates by an eye for an eye.

And so it asks us to look at our personal debts, the ones we have with others, and the ones we hold over ourselves. What is it that we need to let go of, what expectation do we need to relax? Are we afraid to trust in someone else's capacity for mercy, the other whom we have offended.

After all, our God does not seek to get even, or have us get even with each other. Our God seeks to hug us while we are still messing up and to show us a new way, an alternative to retaliation. One can only wonder, what might have happened if those parents did not rush up the stairs that evening and hug their little boy? Can we stand before God and ask for a big hug? That is what this Eucharist is about every time we gather in His name. AMEN