Luke 16:1-13
September 22, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
Forgive, no matter what.

We were in Bible Study on Thursday morning and we are reading through the first book of Kings. We've only made it to chapter two where Solomon secures his kingship following the death of his father David. Unfortunately, "securing his throne," means executing people who might potentially oppose him. One of our members said, "This is why I don't like the God of the Old Testament, it's so violent." There is a lot of violence in the history of Israel, things I might wish were not in the Bible. But there are things in the New Testament that make me uncomfortable too. Even things that Jesus says. Haven't you ever thought that there are some things that just shouldn't be in the Bible. Did you ever think that when you hear a story or passage in the Bible that really bothers you?

"I can't believe this story ever came from the lips of our Lord." That's not me saying that. Those words were supposed to be said by St. Augustine when he commented on the Parable of the Unjust Steward. Don't you feel that way when you hear it? Does this even make sense to you? It's probably safe to say that there are as many ideas about what this parable means as there are people that read it. So, of course, I'm here to tell you what it really means. Or you can come to the Adult Study that meets during Sunday school and discuss what you think this means. But at least let me tell you the things that strike me about this story.

First this is a parable. It's not a story about something that really happened. A parable is a story with a point. Some parables are "go and do likewise" parables. You know the story of the Good Samaritan for example. He showed mercy on the man who had fallen among robbers and had been beaten. Go and do likewise, Jesus says. Other parable are "how much more" parables. These parable often show people of dubious character doing something good. How much more should Christians do that then, or if someone with great faults can behave lovingly, how much more will God care for us since he loves us perfectly? Our parable is one like that. How much more should Christians behave like the unjust

steward?

But what is it that the steward does that is laudable?

First we need to try to understand some of the situation in Jesus' time. We've heard lots in the last few years in American society about the shrinking middle class and I'm sure in the next year or so we will hear so many candidates for office tell us about how their plans help the middle class. These are discussions that the people of Jesus' time wouldn't really understand. There's not really a "middle class" to speak of during his time. There is the very rich and then there's the poor. By far most people were poor. So when Jesus tells a story about a wealthy landowner, the people he was talking to understood. Here was a rich guy, and most of them probably worked for people like that. Rich people owned land and the poor worked the land for them. They were peasants, to use a medieval term. If you worked the land, then you worked it for someone else. Whether you grew wheat or tended olive trees then you owed the owner a certain amount of the harvest at the end of the year, usually a majority of the crop. In this case, the owner employs a steward to manage his business. And word begins to get around that the the steward is dishonest. We can't tell from the words of the parable whether the story means that the steward is actually dishonest or not, and maybe it doesn't matter. But the owner calls him in and tells him that he is going to be fired. What should he do? Some intepreters think that he fraudulently changes the owners accounts in hopes that those who owe the master will let him into their homes after he is fired since he saved them so much money. That's one way to look at it.

Another way is to consider that in those days the way accounts often worked was that if the owner of the land told his steward that he wanted fifty jugs of oil from the proceeds of the olive press, the steward would then go and demand a hundred from those working the land. As long as the owner got his fifty, the steward could demand whatever he felt the peasants could deliever and he could keep the profit. So when the problems arise, and the steward reworks the bills, it may be that what is meant is that he is cutting out some of his own profit. He has his own long term welfare in mind, he won't make a profit this year, but maybe some of these peasants will employ him since he saved them so much

money, or even when the owner sees how self-sacrificing he has been, he will change his mind and keep him on. And that's what happens in this version of the parable. The steward, sacrificing his own profit, forgives the debt of the peasants. In fact, maybe forgiveness is what this parable is all about. Remember that this story comes on the heels of the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that parable, the central idea is the father's forgiveness of his wayward son. Maybe this parable expands on the necessity of forgiveness. In the Prodigal Son, the father forgives out of love, and we all see that as laudable. In this parable, the steward forgives out of self interest and Jesus also commends this kind of forgiveness. The unjust steward forgives. He forgives things that he may have no right to forgive. Maybe he forgives for all the wrong reasons, for personal gain, maybe to make up for the fact that he really has been dishonest. But is that the message of the parable? Forgive, no matter what the reason? Go ahead, forgive it all, forgive it now, and forgive for good reasons or for selfish ones, or for no reason that you can think of.

How does that feel? Weird, right? Shouldn't we forgive because we've truly let go of a wrong and we are able to forgive in our hearts? Why do we forgive? There are lots of great reasons to forgive. We can forgive out of love, or in Jesus' name, because he asks us to, or because of the gratitude we feel because we have been forgiven, or because we want to be free of the burden of bitterness, or because we think we'll have a better chance of being rewarded if we forgive. The parable tells us that there is no bad reason to forgive. Maybe we're forgiving for a selfish reason, maybe we forgive someone because we think they will forgive us in return; or because we hope they will treat us better. Maybe we forgive because we're afraid that if we don't, God won't forgive us. For whatever reason we forgive, even if it is like the unjust steward,who forgives to save his own skin—he still forgives. If he can forgive to save his job or to give himself a safety net if his firing proves unavoidable, then we who have experienced real grace, how much more reason do we have to forgive? Remember this is not a go and do likewise parable, it's a parable that says if a scoundrel like this can forgive, how much more should we be able to forgive? Sometimes we think up reasons not to forgive. Maybe we think the other person doesn't

deserve it. Maybe we think "I'll forgive her as soon as she shows some real remorse. I'll forgive him when he makes some steps to show that he's changed his life. I'll forgive when I think they really deserve forgiveness." But doesn't this parable tell us to forgive anyway? Isn't forgiveness like grace? And isn't that what the church is built on? Forgiveness. Aren't we the fellowship of the forgiven? And the passage that Maureen read for us from Jeremiah ask the question, "is there a balm in Gilead?" In ancient times Gilead was an area east of the Jordan famous for a balm, an ointment made from a tree that was supposed to bring healing. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. I think it is forgiveness. Our hearts and souls are healed by being forgiven and by learning to forgive. This Christian experience we share is that knowledge that somehow, somewhere he has forgiven us and has given us the power to forgive each other. That's how the covenant community is built. Like the poet William Butler Yeats has said:

When such as I cast out remorse
so great a sweetness flows into the breast
we must laugh and we must sing,
we are blest by everything,
everything we look upon is blest.[1]

When we are forgiven it is a blessing. And being forgiven we can then be a blessing.

Forgiveness. We are forgiven by God. For anything. There is nothing God cannot forgive. What about us. Have we forgiven? Is there any of us who doesn't need to be forgiven? Is there any of us who isn't where we are today because those we love have forgiven us? Can we forgive in return, for whatever reason, even if it's selfish? We are told by Christ that we must forgive. Every Sunday we pray the prayer, "Forgive us our sins, *as we forgive those who sin against us.*" As we forgive. If we are forgiven, we must forgive. No matter what. Maybe that's hard. To forgive no matter what. Maybe we wish that wasn't in the Bible either. But it is.

---

1 Quoted by J William Harkins, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. 2.* p. 96