

Trinity IX

Collect of the Day

Let Your merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of your humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions, make them so ask such things as shall please You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This collect is really interesting for the really tight little logical loop it takes us on. We pray for God to hear our prayers mercifully and then, so that our prayers get favorable responses, we ask God “make” us ask for the things he will grant us. If you are an American protestant this has a serious problem for you. But of course, being an American sort of protestant might also simply be the problem. For us the will is supreme. I should pray for the things I want to pray for. After all, isn't the whole idea of prayer really about God answering my prayers?

Is that really what prayer is about?

Or is prayer simply a lived out relationship with God in which He is God and I am a creature, His creature? Is my will what truly matters here or is it his will? Is the best prayer the prayer that has been conformed to God's vision for the world and which has been prayed in humility before Him?

But that feels so uncomfortable to the people who have drunk deeply of the zeitgeist in which faith is an act of the will, but also prayer, mercy, forgiveness, love, and every other virtue is an act of the will. Even service has become “volunteering,” a word which takes its root from the Latin word for “will.” Indeed everything in life has it seems become the act of an autonomous agent who decides even those things which generations past assumed were givens, not choices. Of course I refer to things like gender and even race; but even among those who reject the more radical expressions of the will in our society, the good and godly folk who sit in our pews, the triumph of the will over all else is not hard to see. Look at the politics of the Synod or the district or the local congregation. This is not the expression of a humble obedience to Christ and Confessions. It is too often the expression of will, even the arrogant demand that I have interpreted Scripture and Confessions the way they should be read and I will use the organs of power to force my interpretation on others, rather than the persuasive power of the Word to which Luther appealed. (We must admit, Luther was dealing with an Emperor who had declared that Luther should be executed as a heretic.)

And so we pray today that our prayers, this basic unit of our faith-filled life needs to be shaped and conformed to God's good and gracious will. I encourage you to take a moment to read the rest of the wonderful prayer that David prays in our OT reading. Just after these verses he prays that God has given strength to bend a bow of bronze and a wide place for his feet so the slaughter could continue without slipping.

We don't read those words in our Scripture readings today. Is it because David also needed to pray this prayer? Or is it simply because we don't want to give the young hooligans in the

confirmation class any ideas about approved behaviors in church? We don't often read, if at all, the parts of the Bible in which the Psalmist, often David, or the other authors of the OT speak of righteous anger and holy wrath poured out on their various enemies. Have we conformed the prayers of the people to our will or have they been conformed to God's will? I am not sure.

Readings

II Samuel 22:26-34

- ²⁶ “With the merciful you show yourself merciful;
with the blameless man you show yourself blameless;
²⁷ with the purified you deal purely,
and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous.
²⁸ You save a humble people,
but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them down.
²⁹ For you are my lamp, O LORD,
and my God lightens my darkness.
³⁰ For by you I can run against a troop,
and by my God I can leap over a wall.
³¹ This God—his way is perfect;
the word of the LORD proves true;
he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.
³² “For who is God, but the LORD?
And who is a rock, except our God?
³³ This God is my strong refuge
and has made my way blameless.
³⁴ He made my feet like the feet of a deer
and set me secure on the heights

These beautiful words of David are part of a long song/psalm attributed to him which takes up most of the chapter. As modern prose readers we usually skip this whole chapter to jump head to David's last words to Solomon which read like some Mafia Don on his death bed giving instructions to his lieutenants as he is dying: “Don't forget to take care of so-and-so...” That sounds exciting to us, but poetry? We just don't have time for poetry and that means we are an impoverished culture. These words are worth reading carefully and slowly and thinking about them.

This psalm is prefaced with a context. These words were spoken by David after God had delivered him from danger and the hand of Saul. This is an excerpt from the Psalm and I encourage you to read the whole thing. It is also found in the Psalter in almost exactly this form as Psalm 18.

Vss 26-27 have a little surprise in there, don't they? God is merciful with the merciful, he is blameless with the blameless. That sounds reasonable. But with the crooked he is “tortuous.”

The word involves the twisted and contorted body of a wrestler gripping his foe. I am rather reminded of Jacob, wrestling with God and prevailing, but in the final outcome God claims him (gives a new name) and collects on the deal which Jacob had made with God at Bethel. God can be more subtle than we can imagine. He invented language, remember, and so don't try to trick him with words. He will always win that one.

Vs. 28 brings us to a familiar OT trope: God has an eye on the little guy and brings the haughty low. Mary picks this up in the Magnificat. Hannah's song also speaks of this at the beginning of I Samuel. The preacher today needs to remember that as Americans, we stand atop of the world's social and economic orders, even though we may feel poor in our own land. Very few people in the world can afford a refrigerator or an automobile and sleep less than 10 to a room. This may not be good news.

Vss 29-30 are David's assertions of just what God does for him. He lights the darkness for David. With God on his side, David can face an entire troop of the enemy. He can perform super-human feats, leaping over a wall.

Vs. 31 David asserts that God's way is perfect, his word proves to be true. He keeps promises. When he says something it happens. He is a shield for all who trust in him.

Vs. 32 David notes the peculiarity of God. No one is like Him. He alone, the LORD, is God. Every other claimant to that title is a fake. The Lord is a rock. This word bears a little exploration. If you read the OT, rocks are always good things. Stones are what you use for judgment, hurling them at the sinner. We stumble over the stone, but God is our rock and fortress (Psalm 46).

Vss. 33-34 Again David follows the assertion about God's nature with the benefits to him. But this time notice how they have changed from being the great warrior in battle to something far more profound and important. God has made his way blameless (Justification!). God has given him the fleet feet of the deer and set him on the heights (heaven?).

As we note above, the psalm continues in a much more martial spirit as David praises God for giving him strength to bend a bronze bow and triumph over his enemies. Yet, there are surprises too. It is God's gentleness which has given David the victory.

Almost any of these verses could be a basis for a sermon. I would not try to preach the whole thing. One rather gets lost in those sorts of exercises. As a Lutheran, I can hardly walk past vs 33 and the clear justification motif that is there.

Sermon Idea He has made my ways blameless (That the Holy Spirit would call the hearer to the confident, joyful worship which is offered by a forgiven saint.)

The preacher will really preach this verse and the Psalm for the day, David's great penitential psalm which we may sing as an offertory on a regular basis (Vs. 10 - Create in me a clean heart...")

God has made David's way blameless, but that is not because David's way was in any way blameless of his own doing. God has made it blameless and that took a great deal of making on God's part! David's ways were hardly blameless. He was a soldier and warlord. He had slaughtered human beings and occasionally did some rather unsavory things. He committed adultery, murdered to cover it up, and then spun a web of lies to explain the death of his trusted servant and the legitimate husband of the woman who now bore his child. Making David's way blameless took significant effort on God's part. But David is not wrong. God did make his way blameless.

Too often we confess our sins and love them too much that we won't really let this happen. We carry them around in a false sort of humility which becomes a fundamental denial of what God has done. When we confess those sins, when we hear that absolution, when we partake of that sacramental meal, God is not pretending that our sins are forgiven and we are holy and pure. He is not just going through some sort of sham which is designed to give us a psychologically therapeutic benefit. He is actually doing something. He is taken them away. He loves to do that. He delights in being merciful. He will do it again and again for as long as we live in this world. But make no mistake here. He really does it.

St. Augustine would regularly begin his sermons by addressing the congregation as the "holy ones of God" or "saints." They had been forgiven as well. So he used the language. Our own Dr. Luther coined the phrase *simul justus et peccator* meaning I am simultaneously a sinner and a saint. That is not a 50/50 sort of thing or some other fraction, but it is wholly sinner, like David, but also wholly saint, blameless like David confesses here. God has done his work.

Yes, of course, I need to remember the sinner part of that, but that remembrance cannot deny the saintliness which is also mine. We confess this already. When we read the Gospel or pray, most congregations stand. I think too often we imagine that is because of respect for the Gospel, like we stand for the judge who enters the courtroom. Not so! That tradition dates back to Roman times where the proper reaction to an official was not to stand but to bow. The higher the official the lower the bow. If it was the emperor, you were flat on your face – imagine the Moslem at prayer. We stand because it is a way of owning our sonship, our status, our standing in God's presence. The sons of God stand when he speaks because we are righteous, we belong there. We are not groveling servants or petitioners who come seeking some boon. Our king speaks, we listen, but we listen as the children of God, standing, righteous in his sight. When we pray, we might also stand. It is the same thing. The ancients prayed with eyes wide open and looking up. They spread their arms in anticipation of the blessings which would come raining down from that heavenly Father. They were confidence and eager. Our current posture of folded hands, closed eyes, and bowed heads owes its origin to medieval spiritualistic piety. Perhaps not the best theological foundation.

Now we need not fear. God hears the penitential prayers of lent which are spoken on our knees. He hears the fervent prayers prayed with closed eyes and bowed heads. God hears them all, but the point we want to make is that he hears them all, and both sorts belong in our prayer life. The

penitential and the confident prayer of David because Jesus has done what Jesus did. We all can pray “our Father...” and we all can call him “Abba – Father” and know that he delights in our prayers because His Son, David’s Son too, has made us delightful.

Psalm 51:1-12

- ¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
- ³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
- ⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- ⁶ Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

The choice of this psalm with the OT reading above is intentional and the two need to be read together. Of course this is the great penitential psalm of David after being confronted by the prophet for his adulterous affair, murder, lies, and the Watergate-worthy cover-up of his transgressions. We are all familiar enough with this story I don't need to hash it out except to say that this is what made David's way blameless. Not that he got life right, but that he brought this sort of garbage to God, the merciful forgiver of sins. David was not a good man by the

standards of civil righteousness. We would have impeached him as our president long ago. But God calls him the greatest of all the kings and the best one. That was not an evaluation of his morals, but of his relationship with God which was forged in the deserts of Judea as he fled Saul and even earlier when the youngest son of Jesse tended the flock and fought off lions, bears, and even the occasional giant.

I Corinthians 10:6-13 (This reading occurs [expanded to 1-13] on the third Sunday in Lent in year C of the three year series. Below are my comments, edited from the last time we dealt with this.)

I Corinthians 10:1-13

¹For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹²Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

This end of this text shows up in many of the Bible studies I have led as well as in other conversations with Christians about the topic of temptation. We seem to have this down, what we don't have down is the first part of this pericope.

Paul wants his Corinthian congregation to know that their fathers were all under the cloud, passed through the sea, etc. But these are all gentiles, they are not Jews, or at least a fair number of them. But Paul can call them children of those Exodus Israelites through faith (see Galatians 3 among other places.) He doesn't even need to explain that here, but perhaps it does merit a little closer attention on our part.

But then things get weird. His recapitulation of the Exodus event includes a few details I missed out on in my Old Testament introduction class. It is essential here to remember that Paul, prior to his conversion, had been educated as a rabbinic Jew. He did not perceive of his conversion to Christianity as a departure from his previously held faith, but as a completion or a fulfillment of that faith. He did not stop being a Jew, instead he became a Jew whose messiah had already come.

The Rabbis of the first and subsequent centuries used an interpretational technique which we don't find as palatable, but is still practiced in some quarters of Christianity today and was wide spread among the Church fathers. They read it "literally" not in the sense that all of us read literally after the enlightenment, but in another, highly religious sense. They believed that every word, every stroke of the pen, was in fact inspired. Thus a word that was present or not present could have tremendous importance. In Jewish communities as they read the Torah this was practiced with considerable rigor. Every text was scrutinized with great detail, argued about, and back stories were created to explain why the text said it this way or that way. These back stories were called Midrash and were considered somewhat authoritative, although not with the same authority as the Bible.

Paul is quoting and using of these midrash stories in this passage. In the accounts of the Exodus it says that the people of Israel drank water from the rock which Moses struck. This is recorded in Exodus 17, immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. But then again, much later in the narrative, a similar story is told in Numbers 20. Our occidental minds simply read this and assume that another rock was struck. But the oriental mind of a literal reading Jewish rabbi does not think that way. Because the definite article is used and the rock is described as "the" rock, the Jewish interpreters of Paul's day assumed it was the same rock. They are in different places, but this simply must mean that the rock followed them around in the desert. This explanation was eventually accepted and became a midrash.

Paul is quoting this midrash in the first paragraph, but Christianizing it by saying that the rock which followed them was actually Jesus. For us the question is "what is this doing in my Bible?" It also makes us wonder about just how authoritatively this speaks. Do I have to accept that if I am someone who believes in the inspiration of Scripture? Fortunately there is a little room to have a discussion here, but it is not always an easy discussion.

It is the second paragraph which is our text for the day. The second paragraph tells us that these stories were included in the text for our instruction. In other words, God had us in mind when he caused these things to be written down. That is an interesting hermeneutical truth which has something to say about the way we read them. The whole post-enlightenment interpretational world has been dedicated to saying that this is not true, that these passages are independent and any application is simply one we make ourselves. Paul doesn't live in that world.

Paul asserts that these stories are cautionary tales for us, so we don't fall into the same sort of trap. Pride is identified as a serious weakness here, something which will cause us to fall into sin. The Corinthians and the rest of us are not subject to special temptation or things which other folks have not also endured. God knows temptation, he will help us, and he will also give us a way out. We might often fail to see it, fail to walk through that door, but always God will be ready to help us escape this moment of temptation. I think the real take-away message here is that temptations are not "tests" which God administers to us to see if we will fail or otherwise not measure up. They are a reality of this broken world, God does not like them either, and so he is here to help us through them, even though we honestly have failed on many occasions before.

He does not abandon us, but walks through the door that is today with us and faces our challenges with us, and offers us his help. You might connect to David's Psalms which we treat above. David needed a God who forgave and helped him every day. We get that same God who does not dwell on the fact that we have failed. He forgives it and starts with us today on the challenges that it brings. This is a totally different way to think about temptation than most people do, even when they quote this passage, which they frequently do. Out of context it sounds like a total body slam on the fallen sinner. God tried to help you, but you failed. In fact, this is a message of hope to every addict who has hit rock bottom as well as every Christian who simply engages in the struggle with sin.

The real body slam is on the person who does not think they really need this help, or who has grown so comfortable with their sin that they have just quit fighting it. I really believe that most of this generation will comfortably slouch their way to perdition. They won't commit some terrible sin, neither will they actually try to stop sinning. They will just put up with it, consider it normal, and in so doing turn their back on the help that God offers them. This is complacency.

We really need to spend a little time on this line: "You have not faced a temptation that is not common to man." The horror of temptation is that it isolates us, makes us think that we alone have failed, that we are really awful, worse than anyone else when we fail. It leaves us in a dark and lonely place, just where our enemy would like to keep us. Paul opens the door and shines a little light for us. We are not alone. God is there. He never really left us even when we succumbed to temptation.

God is faithful, he was there every time you failed, and he will be there next time you face that temptation, pulling hard, helping, providing, he hopes, he has faith, this time might be the time you and he have the victory over this one. He is faithful. He never gives up on you!

Sermon Idea: He follows us through the wilderness (That the Spirit of God would open the hearer's heart to recognize the presence of Christ in his/her life right now.)

David's story would have to be worked in here a little – God loves folks who don't get it right and who make a train wreck of their lives. He never stops loving them.

Paul, however, gives us the theme for this message. Jesus is a rock that follows God's people around through the wilderness. (If you use this theme, you will need to expand the text a little from what the pericope has.) God is faithful, like that rock that followed them through the desert of long ago. They were difficult and hard to get along with, but that rock kept following them, God never stopped loving them. We have often struggled with our own sins, but God has never stopped loving us. The next time we face that sin, though we have often succumbed in the past, God will be right there to help that day too.

And then Jesus comes to us in this amazing and frankly disturbing Gospel lesson. The parable he speaks relates a God character who is profligate with his forgiveness but whose forgiveness is hoarded by the very man whom he forgave. This results in terrifying consequences. The love of God is not pre-conditional, but it does change us once it arrives. One cannot measure that change

and one cannot simply turn that change into a measure of faith as many have done, but we also cannot deny that God's love does something to us.

The sermon is really asserting the presence of Christ, even on our worst and darkest days, the days when we have completely blown it and fallen into terrible sin. Jesus is still there and offers us his help. The preacher may want to work a Lord's Supper angle into this. This presence of Christ is real – sacramentally real. It is not just a pious thought or a nice idea, but we are talking about a genuine presence. The Jesus who showed up in the upper room did not break in; he was there the whole time.

The preacher who is thinking about the presence of Christ may want to remember that the person who is going through the difficult time does not perceive the presence of Christ in the middle of the stress, but in looking back one can see his gentle presence in many different ways. You can assure the person going through garbage in his/her life that this feeling of God's absence is real and normal. That feeling is not a sign of his absence but a reality of your suffering. You have been there too, and you can also tell them that it will get better. There will come a day when you can look back on it and see him and his love again. This is not a license for the sinner to delay, but it is comfort for the suffering person.

Luke 16:1-13 (*This text appears, lengthened by two verses, in Series C in Proper 20.*)

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.² And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'³ And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'⁶ He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'⁷ Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'⁸ The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

¹⁰"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.¹¹ If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?¹² And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?¹³ No servant can serve two masters, for

either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

¹⁴ *The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.*

¹⁵ *And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.*

Luther

1. Today’s Gospel is a sermon on good works – especially against greed – teaching us not to misuse our property and wealth, but to help poor, needy people with them, as the Lord himself explains and concludes in no uncertain terms, “Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness,” that is, assist the poor with your money and goods.

3. Now, the Lord sets this parable before us, not so that we should emulate the unjust steward in what he did, to deal unjustly with one another and defraud our neighbor of what he has. His intention is that we should emulate this steward in foresight, management, good sense, and that just as he was concerned about his own future need – although to his master’s disadvantage – so we should plan wisely for the future and use our wealth in such a way that, if the need arises, we might benefit from it in our lives later on. The unjust steward saw that he would need other people’s help, now that he was to be dismissed from his job, and so he used his position, while still employed, to summon his master’s debtors, reducing one debtor’s account by fifty tubes of butter, and another’s by twenty bushels of wheat. That is how his strategy went: When I am removed from my job I want those whose indebtedness I am radically reducing to welcome me into their homes. Such astuteness we ought to emulate, making friends with our Mammon, just as this steward made friends with his master’s wealth.

6. Therefore, the intent of today’s Gospel is that we ought not be greedy, but make proper use of wealth, and make friends for ourselves with the wealth God has bestowed, so that, when we die and are in want, that is, when we have to leave everything behind, we may find friends there who will take us into eternal habitations. For whatever good we do here for needy people, showing them friendship and kindness, these very deeds will on Judgment Day not merely bear witness to the fact that we have conducted ourselves in a brotherly and Christian fashion, but will also have their reward. There, one will come forward with praise, saying, Lord, he gave me a coat, a gulden, a piece of bread, a drink of water in my need; I bear witness that he gave solid evidence of his faith. Yes, on Judgment Day Christ himself will come forward and before his heavenly Father, all the angels, and saints speak highly of what we have done to one of the least of his brethren, that is as he explains it, as having done good unto him personally. These friends will testify in our behalf, hailing us into heaven in our hour of need when we must leave everything behind on earth.

7. Our wealth will not help us get to heaven. But when we make righteous Mammon out of unrighteous Mammon, that is, when we make proper instead of improper use of Mammon, and

with the wealth and possessions God has bestowed on us come to the aid and assistance of the poor who are unable to earn their own livelihood, we thus give evidence of our faith and testify that we are upright Christians and heirs of eternal life. In this way also the poor, and Christ himself, will commend us publicly on that day because of what we have done. For in no wise can it be that Christians use their money and possessions only for themselves, for their own vain purposes, honor, sensuous desires, and pride, as we see burghers and peasants doing; it proves the axiom by which such skinflints live: I have corn and bread for myself, if you want these things, then work for them. This is called unrighteous corn and bread, unrighteous Mammon, and by it they commit sin, to their own destruction, when they could be using it for good purposes to the service of God and to his pleasure, were they serving their neighbor with it.

(The Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils. Vol. 2. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker Publ., 1996. pp. 358-364.)

Notice that this parable is specifically told to the disciples, not the sinners/tax collectors and Pharisees who were the audience of the prior three parables.

This is a monster of a parable. As soon as you get one idea of what this parable means, you read another verse and it all collapses. Jesus tells this parable about the unfaithful steward who cheats his boss and then gets commended for it. Jesus says we should use our unrighteous wealth to make friends with people so they will welcome us into eternal dwellings. Money is definitely the theme here and Jesus appears to be calling upon us to make stark choices.

It seems the key to understanding this difficult text is our understanding of just what is unrighteous wealth? Luther understands it to be any wealth which is used selfishly. He spends a great deal of time discerning that Jesus could not mean ill-gotten money. That, he says should just be returned. Is it worldly wealth? Do we use it here on earth for what? How does it help us win points with the folks who are going to welcome us into eternal dwellings (heaven?) This is the way Luther understands the parable, but he goes through some pretty interesting maneuvers to avoid having us emulate the cheating of the steward. He says it is a little like admiring the skill of the prostitute who is putting on her make-up. We can say she does a good job with that but we don't have to agree with the whole package of what it is serving.

Another way to look at it is that the "unrighteous money" is the treasure we have which we don't deserve (unearned). What treasure do all of us have which is "unearned?" Do we actually give away the treasures of God, like this scoundrel steward? Is this a form of a really negative image which Jesus uses to convey the mystery of the gospel? Is this parable really about forgiveness? If you understand it flowing out of chapter 15, it might make more sense that way. Robert Capon saw it that way. The unrighteous treasure was the forgiveness which we had been given without earning it.

So how does that play into the service of God or Money? What does money demand? What does God demand of us? Money is all about making the accounts balance. God is about grace, mercy,

and gift, which is not earned, a totally scandalous way to do business. If we serve money, we demand that the scales all balance, there is no forgiveness in this. If we serve God, it is all about grace, the scales just don't balance.

There seems to be a number of ways to go here. We have looked at this text for multiple cycles now and several ideas have been surfaced and rejected.

The Rejects

- 1. Mission Text – We thought it did violence to the text to turn “make friends who will welcome you into heavenly dwellings” into a rationale for supporting missions.*
- 2. Make the parable palatable – downplaying the chicanery of the manager so he seemed to be a guy who was just reducing debts so he could get something out of the deadbeats with the result that he helped his boss and the debtors seemed out of step with the parable and Jesus' own interpretation of it. I must say, however, that Capon runs this way.*
- 3. Negative example – like the persistent widow or the father who gives his children a scorpion or a snake, this read of the parable says that if even a terrible fellow like this gets something good, imagine what will happen to you if you are faithful. Again, this just did not jibe with how Jesus seems to see this. In years past we did not think this was good.*
- 4. The manager is actually a positive example of someone who in his extreme situation stopped serving himself, truly became a servant of others by reducing their debts and thus, even though he was slated for getting fired, things turned out OK for him. This interpretation suggests that if we amend our sinful ways, things will turn out OK. Again, we thought this downplayed the offensive nature of the parable to which Jesus points.*
- 5. We could become a de facto higher critic and simply declare that Jesus did not say this. Of course we would not do that, but don't we do that in actuality when we never preach on the hard texts? We make Jesus into the sort of Jesus who says things I like to hear and redact from the body of the NT the passages which give us a hard time.*

We did come up with some possible interpretations of the parable which we thought had some merit; although, it must be said that all interpretations of this parable have detractors.

- 1. Priorities – this is a first commandment sort of text. The problem with money is not money itself, but the unrighteous wealth, the money which controls us. Our attitudes turn money into either a bane or a blessing.*
- 2. This then led to a second and related reading about what is righteous wealth, the sort of wealth with which we are faithful in little things and which reaps heavenly rewards. We thought that righteous wealth was actually treasure received from Christ, spent in Christ's service, and which reflects the very love of God in my life, not my grasping desire. The actual money itself is neutral but the spender is never neutral. It is either an act of worship or of self-worship/idolatry. Righteous wealth is spent as a gift from God,*

unrighteous wealth is only begrudgingly released when I get something in return, preferably something I think is more valuable and therefore a cheat against the other person.

3. *Jesus seems to be speaking of an attitude toward money which runs counter to the attitudes of the world. The world says get more, but Jesus says give it away. Is this a parable and interpretation on Jesus part which is really an exhortation to counter-cultural generosity? This is related to #1 and #2, but might be a more specific way to see this. The Christian is simply a generous person.*
4. *We also thought money could be a stand in for life here. We often ask how someone makes a living when we are talking just about the money they make. Even in Jesus day this connection between income and living was made. When the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance in the prior chapter he asks for his share of his fathers "bios" or life.*
5. *We also thought that we might spiritualize the treasure but noted some problems with this. If the treasure which is un-righteously ours is "forgiveness" or "love" (and this does have the benefit of tying this chapter to the one which precedes it) then the behavior of the unjust steward becomes interesting, but on some level even harder to explain. Capon also likes this idea and suggests that the act of loving and forgiving someone might well be seen as "cheating" God of his due. But the master does still get something here, this seems a stretch. Why would Jesus call this unrighteous wealth? Is it because we get it undeservedly?*

This seems to come in the whole context of the radical work of Christ. In the last chapter, (chapter 15), Jesus has addressed the scandalous nature of the Gospel. The love of God is even shown to the losers. Does Jesus willingly take up a scandalous image to convey the nature of his kingdom? This is good because honesty will always put me there. Is it possible that this text is much simpler than we have made it out to be? Is this simply a picture of God showing mercy to a really lousy human being? Is the point not the manager so much as the master's treatment of the manager? He thought he was buying something, but the master shakes his head and loves him despite his dishonesty and his foolish attempts to do something about it. What does one do with the commendation Jesus seems to give this guy at the end? I am not sure about this. It sounds like the master is commending dishonest, self-serving behavior.

I was told by a former missionary some time ago that an African culture and indeed most tribal societies would not blink an eye at this text. One was considered not merely acceptable but even virtuous in cheating someone outside the "tribe," in this case the master, in order to protect your own family. Another missionary said he saw it all the time in Africa, that people would cheat their employer to serve their own family and people considered it simply being a faithful son of the family. In this view, the dishonest steward was actually embodying a sort of tribal virtue which he had compromised by working for the master, but now, with his job in peril, he returned to that virtue by taking care of the members of his tribe. The master then recognized and in turn

honored his “virtuous” behavior. I must tell you that I am not sure how that would work in this text and I am also not able to verify very well that this is how a tribal society would see it. Can anyone give me insight into this?

I was told as well that the parable of the prodigal is really interesting when you run it through a cultural lens. If you ask an African why the prodigal was starving, he will answer: “because no one helped him.” If you ask a Russian he will say, “because there was a famine.” (Remember Russia’s brutal history with famine.) If you ask an American why the man was starving, the usual response is, “he wasted all his money.” What we read in these parables is very culturally conditioned. I am not sure that we can use the African lens without having Jesus looking like he is condoning behavior which our culture considers criminal. But what will we do with this? I am not sure. For me the most palatable solution is to think of this as a disturbing but perceptive insight into just what we do in forgiveness. We are giving away the master’s treasure – namely his favor and love, to those who are indebted to the master, but we are forgiving the debt.

The discussions from earlier in Luke in which Jesus speaks of giving up all, even family and life itself as we take up a cross seem to be resonating with the last part of this text.

The next section of the chapter is the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Its clear message of trusting in God needs to be read here too. Luke is too careful of an author simply to throw those things together randomly. How does this parable lead the hearer to that parable’s clearer message?

Is all this really just about the role that money has in our life? Are we making this just too hard in another way? Is the unjust steward just a jerk and does the world commend him because he is a jerk and is Jesus just telling us that the world commends the jerks and God commends the faithful. It seems a little simplistic, but it might fit some of the text for us rather well.

We are going to have to settle some of this before we can really write a sermon. I look forward to hearing what you have to say Tuesday. This is not an easy text.

Sermon Idea: God’s Strange Way (That the hearer would rejoice with God in the forgiveness of scoundrels and other strange, otherworldly ways of the Kingdom of God)

This sermon looks to the parable and tries to make some sense of this for folks, but not too much. God’s ways are not our ways and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts (see Is 55:10-11). We should expect to be befuddled when we talk to God. We might tie this into the sermon from last week. The Pharisees were utterly perplexed by Jesus’ behavior toward the sinners who were sitting at his feet. He actually ate with them – they broke the rules, they should have been punished, but he loved them. What is he thinking? From the Pharisees’s perspective, Jesus was out of his mind. Law development in this sermon might start with the notion that we have so tamed Jesus that he does not shock us anymore.

A homeless guy in Boston recently returned thousands of dollars he found. Or there was a little boy who showed up at a local police department and donated \$10.03 to “do something good with it.” His name was Max, you could probably find it on a Google search.

The parable paints a picture which sounds strange to our ears. A man's business manager seems to be cheating him. He is supposed to settle some accounts and he ends up forgiving debt that doesn't belong to him. All this he does for what seems like a terribly selfish reason. And the master commends him and Jesus suggests that somehow we are to emulate this fellow????

Did Jesus miss something here? Did he not notice that this guy was dishonest? What is going on with this? Is he actually commending to us the behavior of a scoundrel? You can go to prison for doing this sort of thing. Is the kingdom of heaven really like this? If it is do I want to be part of it? After all, if you take the one righteous guy who ever lived, cruelly and unjustly nail him to a cross and somehow this is supposed to make everything better. Is this really how the kingdom of God works?

Yes, and yes, and yes! God's kingdom does not operate by our rules, at times it may even seem perversely to violate those rules. It is true. After all, this is really what Job learned in the Old Testament book which bears his name. God sometimes does things for reasons which seem to us like he had a parlor bet going with Satan. We expect God to be fair, but do we really want him to be? We expect God to play by a set of rules which we understand, but can we really understand his love and mercy and grace?

God's way of saving this world involves the tortuous, sacrificial death of his only begotten Son. I suppose we can see that with some sort of an economic metaphor and say that such a death is worth the sins of the world and balance our scales that way, but really, does this make sense? God gives himself a gift and calls it even? God's creation rebels against his righteous rule and he doesn't squash it like the deformed slug it has become but instead he joins it, enters it, suffers its worst and dies its death. And that somehow is its salvation, restoration, and redemption. You cannot explain this. Perhaps you can describe parts of it, but for the most part you simply have to believe it.

Don't try to understand all this, don't tell me we have made sense of it. We could ponder this for a thousand years and not plumb its depths. We can see but one facet of this gem at a time, and there are a thousand more, some of which are perpendicular to the one I am looking at right now. We will never be able to hold this in our head, and that is a good thing. If I was running this show the dishonest steward would be sitting in the cell with Bernie Madoff and the rest of his ilk. I would have had God put him on the rack. If God worked this way, my sense of justice would be satisfied, but my future would be fried.

Another Sermon Idea: Priorities (That the hearer would fear, love, and trust in God above all things.)

As the goal for this sermon suggests, this is a sermon about the first commandment, which I think is the real point of the second part of this Gospel text. The preacher may want to be brutally honest about this. He is preaching on the last lines of the text and admitting that he doesn't actually understand what Jesus is doing with the parable. We are going to straight to the punch line and skipping the lead-up to this.

Here is the thing most Lutherans don't get. Having correct doctrine and proper understanding doesn't automatically result in any real fruit. This sermon runs the risk of a congregation nodding their assent and walking out the door to lives which are functionally idolatrous. We don't actually get people to do this by telling them to do this. That is a little like going out and telling your grass to get greener in your lawn. It doesn't work. You get greener grass with water and fertilizer, the things that make your lawn healthy. So too, we don't see this sort of fear, love, and trust of God because we exhort them to fear, love, and trust above all things. Haranguing them into the love of God just doesn't work. We see this fear, love, and trust because we proclaim to them a God who lays claim to that priority of position in our lives by what he has done. We proclaim the God who occupies that place by virtue of the salvation he has wrought. We see this sort of fear, love and trust because in that proclamation the Holy Spirit establishes and feeds that relationship.

We are very used to talking about making God a priority, but in this sermon we want to flip that on its head. We want to notice what our priorities are, but also notice that God is the one who makes himself our priority. Otherwise this is just a harangue on priorities. If God is the "doer" here, it becomes a gospel sermon. If we are the ones who must properly arrange our lives, then this is a law sermon.

So, we don't proclaim that God should be #1, we proclaim he is #1 because he has created us, he has more wonderfully redeemed us, and he has gifted us with Spirit and eternal life. We are not trying to convince them that they should let God be first in their life, as if they were in a position to grant that, we are proclaiming that he is #1! This is not the sort of sermon which seeks to argue someone into changing their mind, it is proclaiming truth so that the Spirit may open their minds and hearts and whole lives to his gracious reign. God makes himself #1 in my life by being good to me.

There was an article in the paper some years ago about a guy who was helped by some Portland residents after Katrina destroyed his New Orleans home. Five years later he is reestablished, back in New Orleans, has a job, and is doing well. But there has been a change, now he roots for the Blazers. He loves Portland. Why? Because they were good to him.

God has been really, really good to us!

Jesus himself asserts that God's gracious kingdom extends into every part their lives, even as far as their wallet. Jesus' death and resurrection have not purchased a part of life, not even a majority of life, but all of life. There are not two masters, only one. God is a jealous God, he shares his rightful title with no other.

But he is also a loving God. He rejoices in the things that are good for you and would that the gifts he bestows give you true Joy because you receive them from him. He is the source of all good things, and evil is only really evil because it lacks him. Even money, he carefully says, is not the problem, but it is the love of money which stands at the root of so many evil things.

This life we describe in which God holds his rightful place is not only a fearful place. It is that, but it does not end there. it is a place in which we experience real joy and peace as God's rightful and gracious rule in our lives produces both love and trust. It is not without purpose that God bids us call him "father." He would hear our prayers as a dear father hears dear children, he would watch over our every moment of every day. This life knows the peace of a child sleeping in its parent's arms, this life blithely plays under the watchful eye of a careful and omnipotent parent.