

BROKERING GRACE
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 22, 2013
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Texts: Jeremiah 8.18-9.1;
 Psalm 79.1-9;
 1 Timothy 2.1-7;
 Luke 16.1-13

This parable has to be one *the* most difficult parables Jesus teaches. Every time I'm puzzled by the logic of Luke's gospel I go back to a resource I discovered several years ago by Paul Borgman.¹ He is not a New Testament scholar. He is actually an English Professor but one who specializes in biblical narrative. I'm sure I've shared this with you before but the way he reads the center of Luke's gospel (the core teaching of Jesus that is found here) is fascinating to me and helps I think to unlock the meaning of this parable today.

Borgman picked up on a pattern in the way the writer of Luke puts the gospel story together.² It's meant to reveal to us the journey of The Way as Luke calls it. It is sometimes called the way of salvation, the kingdom of God, or the way of peace. Salvation is found in understanding The Way and then living according to The Way. You must understand and then you must do. Even more importantly, salvation according to the gospel of Luke is not a reward for doing the right thing. Doing the right thing is itself salvation because it brings us into the way of peace both here and now and for eternity. That's what this teaching is meant to do for us – to show us the Way.

Luke organizes these nine teachings into a chiasm. Each one builds towards a bull's eye: a central teaching on the kingdom of God. Then the themes repeat in reverse order – that's the chiastic structure. So if it sounds

¹ Paul Borgman *The Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

² To see this pattern in visual form, see Borgman pg. 9 and again on pg.78.

to you as we are reading through Luke's gospel this summer and fall that themes are repeating that is because they are!

One of the nine themes has to do with money and possessions. We heard that teaching for the first time through the parable of the Rich Fool in chapter 12 back in August. The first time we heard this theme the conclusion was fairly obvious. In fact, one of the concluding statements today summarizes that parable well: "You cannot serve God and wealth." As Borgman points out in his book, when a theme is revisited on the way out of the center bulls eye, the repetition develops something or qualifies something from the prior passage.³ That's what I want to look for with you as we investigate this parable together today: how does this parable qualify or develop in some way the initial warning from chapter 12 "to be on our guard against all kinds of greed (knowing that) one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."⁴

We have this manager who has been asked to give an account for the clients who were entrusted into his care. So this manager goes to all these clients who owe the rich man incredible sums of money and he brokers deals with them in order to restore their relationship with this wealthy man. This is the center of the parable. If we talk about it in these ways, are you beginning to see a possible way to read this parable? Jesus has on other occasions used the forgiveness of debt as a metaphor for the forgiveness of sin. Think of the traditional language of The Lord's Prayer for instance.

So what if we read this parable with Jesus as the manager running around town with the folks who have the deepest debts brokering deals to restore them God? It certainly fits with the experience Jesus has been having with the Pharisees. As Lynn reminded us last week, they watch who Jesus associates with and they are outraged. Not only did he hang out with these sinners but he was arrogant and brazen enough to declare that their sins were forgiven...how dare he? He has no authority to forgive sins! Right? That's the whole offense here as well. Here is this questionable character, in the eyes of the Pharisees, going around town settling their

³ Borgman, pg. 9-10.

⁴ Luke 12.15, NRSV

debts. From their perspective looking at Jesus as a rabbi, he is like a manager who has no authority to broker deals like that.

And what's the surprising ending here? The wealthy business owner praises him for his shrewd dealings! If the first teaching in Luke 12 warns against greed and the abundance of possessions, this parable makes a qualification.⁵ If you do have access to wealth and possessions use those things to bring mercy and relief to those who are suffering.

It is one level about wealth and possessions. On another deeper level: what's being exposed in this text is the outrageous generosity of God's grace and how it offends the sensibilities of good, clean religious folks. The Pharisees didn't want to see themselves as having debts of this magnitude. They could not accept that God's grace in their lives could even compare to the grace needed in the lives of the tax collectors and prostitutes Jesus associated with. As Lynn was pushing to consider last week, I suspect we bump up against the very same sensibilities in ourselves. Why else do people disappear when a crisis comes? How many people do you know, or maybe you can testify yourself, stopped coming to worship when life was falling apart: when your marriage was in trouble or finances were a mess or an addiction got out of control.

We have this idea that if we belong to Christ and live our lives in faith then the goal is to be perfect. So we hide anything that might tarnish our image. But God never promised that we would be perfect. God only asked that we be humble; ready to receive grace beyond our expectation and beyond what we deserve. Then to become brokers of this grace in the lives of other debtors who need to be restored to God just as we have been: to taste and feel the way of peace Jesus came to show us. And according to this parable we're invited to be a bit shrewd about that task...outrageous even.

I'm thinking of the Pastor of Grace Reformed Church in Newark I met while serving my first congregation back in the middle 90s. I took some kids from the youth group to work on repairing a playground at this little

⁵ The reason Luke needed to share Jesus' teaching about the first parable in such a stark and unqualified way is because of how strongly the tradition viewed wealth as a sign of righteousness. He needed to undo that link in people's minds before adding the qualification.

inner-city church. The congregation reminds me of what I heard about the Greenpoint Reformed Church in Brooklyn where our youth group goes on their mission trips. They were a very small group dealing with a terribly run down facility and barely any financial resource but making an incredible impact in that neighborhood; bringing mercy, relief from suffering. The kids I brought were pretty sheltered. They had never seen anything like the poverty we were encountering at this place. The Pastor came out and started telling stories about his ministry there. They kept working but I could tell they were blown away by what he said. His church has been broken into 27 times in the last year. When he mentioned the drug dealers hanging out on every corner sometimes venturing into the church yard, I could see their eyes darting around to see if that was happening on that day. Then the Pastor told them about his decision several years before to do something about it. He stormed out to the street corners where those drug dealers were hanging out and he confronted them with an “assertiveness” that I suspect they had never seen from a clergy person before. He told them in no uncertain terms that this block belonged to him. It belonged in fact to Jesus Christ and he would *not* tolerate the presence of drugs on his block! It was crazy. It was dangerous. And sure enough they moved on. And he kept working tirelessly through his whole ministry to create a safe haven, a place of peace, in that community trying to bring opportunity and hope to the people that lived among them there.

As I think about this parable with these themes in mind – that we all need a broker with this kind of outrageous moxy and that once we receive that grace it is our calling to get out there and make those same kinds of deals - well it opens a whole new kind of freedom in our community. Freedom to be honest about our brokenness and freedom to stop judging other people for theirs. So watch this week. Watch for the opportunities to broker some grace in your part of the world. Chances are it won't lead you to confront the drug dealers in town although I don't know where your life might lead you this week. Maybe that's a connection to one of the sayings that follows this parable: being faithful with much begins by being faithful with a little.

I appreciate the comment Fred Craddock made in his commentary on this passage: "Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war... convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat. "Whosoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much" (v. 10).⁶

So let us be faithful this week...fully aware of all the grace that has been brokered on our behalf, ready to use anything at our disposal to do the same!

⁶ Craddock, Fred, *Luke*; Interpretation Commentaries (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) pp. 191-192.