

The LPCA
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 18, 2016
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Text: Luke 16:1-8

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Luke 16:1-8

The gospel lesson from Luke is a parable of Jesus that has come to be known as ‘the parable of the unjust steward’- a steward being a manager of a household for a wealthy person – a kind of personal assistant given free reign to coordinate the affairs of his employer – and in this case someone who mismanages those affairs. This parable is set in the midst of a series of parables that Jesus tells – the lost sheep and coin, prodigal son, the rich man and poor man, Lazarus – all of those parables probably more well known than this one of the unjust steward – but all of them meant to give some picture or feeling of what the Kingdom of God is about. After I read this lesser known parable of the unjust steward, I’m going to speak to you this morning as the unjust steward himself, and see what he might have to say about himself.

As you can see there’s an LPCA meeting today – oh, I’m sorry – you’re not familiar with the LPCA? - that’s the "Lukan Parable Characters Association" – LPCA – all of the characters from the parables in Luke’s Gospel are a part of the Association – and we all get together from time to time – mostly for reminiscing about the good old days. You know, the glory days of parables: back when mustard seeds and leaven amazed the crowds with their potential; back when sheep and coins and sons were lost and it was really a surprise how much joy there was in finding them; back when people were scandalized over a Samaritan hero. 'Those were the days when we could really wow the crowds'- you'll here some of the characters remark wistfully – ‘but not anymore.’

All the ‘good old days’ talk gets a bit tiresome, but I try to be supportive – because I know they’re all really a bit jealous of me anyway. As we eat our usual meal (leftover loaves and fishes - there’s always plenty), I can see their longing glances at me: ‘if only I could be the unjust steward’- they’re thinking. So every once in a while, just to lift everyone’s spirits, I’ll share some of the

recent sermons I've heard about me- sermons on 'the difficult case of the unjust steward'. - It's funny stuff - the minister who labored to convince his congregation that this parable in no way implied that dishonesty was profitable. Really? The pastor who bravely used my story on Stewardship Sunday: urging her congregation to pay their debt full - giving went down, I'm afraid.

A couple of stories like that is usually enough to get them rolling in the aisles at the LPCA – ‘what will those preachers come up with next?!’ Well, what would you do with me? – my strange parable of a crooked manager? I mean first of all: I'm sorry I did it, OK? – but don't think I'm so terrible – everybody does it – I just got caught. And then my master shows no mercy - I'm about to be out of a job – and so I panic: "what shall I do since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg." A bit melodramatic, I know - but this was a crisis- something had to be done. So, I came up with a crazy plan: I gave a discount to everyone who owed a debt to my master. And my plan worked out even better than I expected- and when my master found out about it, even he couldn't help but give a wry smile. He'd been receiving a lot of unexpected "thank you" notes from his debtors – and he complimented me on my shrewd business move. And, let me tell you, I had more than a few offers for work after that.

It's the kind of strange story that people ONLY remember because JESUS told it - but the thing is, it's precisely the fact that Jesus told my story that's the problem for most people, because this story doesn't fit neatly into the categories people look for in parables – can you figure it out?

- Jesus is the rich master who fires people but says good job for cheating him?

- you're the steward who tries to grab all you can in this life before Jesus gives you the final axe?

- you're the debtors who get a dishonest break without the master's knowledge?

You see, it just doesn't work - there are too many bad guys here and no really good ones.

I'm a tough nut to crack- and I'm darn proud of it. But lately I've noticed a disturbing trend of preachers avoiding me completely! - I'm being relegated to the wasteland of “difficult texts”.

Now I know I'm tough, but I don't want to be ignored. So in my own self-interest (one of my specialties!) I'd like to share some of my own wisdom on a subject close to my heart: me!

So here's the thing- at our LPCA meetings, the other characters may think I'm the lucky one who doesn't fit into a category. But truth be told, my life was all about categories. I did my job, siphoned a bit off the top, was comfortable- not a bad life really: nothing fantastic, but nothing awful either- it was a way just to keep plodding along, day to day- everything was in its place.

And I suspect I'm really not much different than you... Now don't get your defenses up- I'm not calling you a thief – what I'm talking about is categories. Categories are everywhere, and that is how you live your life as much as I did. You have your own way of thinking and doing that works for you – not a bad life really, nothing fantastic, but nothing awful either- you keep plodding along, day to day- everything in its place. You figure most of life is just the way it is - most things will never change; so it's probably no use trying. And it's when you really believe that, that you're really in trouble – when you give in to that kind of attitude, you're not much more alive than I am!

Strong words from an unjust steward? Perhaps, but like I said - I know what that's like. It's not such a bad life in your categories - but it only lasts as long as your categories do. For me, my plodding along world was shattered by a pink slip- my whole world changed – and all my neat categories didn't work anymore. Yeah, so, I was caught with my hand in the cookie jar – sorry! - but then at least I did something about it. I took action – I found a different way.

So how about you? - do you know what it's like to have reality shattered? – to be faced by something that makes you rethink everything? something that makes you re-think all the categories? I think at some point we all do. So, when your reality no longer lets you look at life, at the world, in the same way – when the same old categories, assumptions don't work anymore and there's a new reality to face up to - how will you respond? what will you do? You could go with: fear, anger, hatred, bitterness, self-preservation, despair, denial, anxiety – many do.

Or there's another choice- which is to listen today to something else that will shatter you. What I want to ask you is what happens to you and your categories when you're faced with the one who told my story – because I think Jesus had a message that broke down all the categories. You hear from him about grace, judgement, forgiveness, healing, death, life, service, peace, love- you

hear from him that life is found in the kingdom of God. Hearing that, can you hear where you need to turn when life is shattered? It's always been true, but there's certain times when it becomes very clear - how can you stay in your categories now any more than I could pretend my life was the same after what happened to me? The presence of Jesus is a different kind of shattering of your world: a feeling that life is lived in a different way, a bit of unsettledness, even of humor and joy— those are all a response to the Spirit of Jesus – it is a shattering that can make you whole. And if you'll listen to him, you will find a way to respond to life too- even when life is shattered by things around you.

You see, all I am is a picture of the kingdom Jesus brings; I'm a strange picture, I know! – but I'm a picture of action- a picture of someone who does something – something in the face of a shattered world. What are you going to do? – in the face of a shattered world? in the face of hearing Jesus? – there's no just plodding along in your categories any more...do something.

I mean, how can you not respond when you take a good look at all of us at the LPCA? - the hated Samaritan a hero; beggars at banquets; calling all your friends because you found one little lamb; celebrations for a delinquent child. That's not the way it is in this world- but Jesus says that it really is the way – Jesus offers a shattering grace to you and to the world. He will never fit into your categories, but he will call you to something new. Because, think about it, if even I can be a symbol of the Kingdom, categories really have been thrown out the window. And let's be honest- not something I make a habit of- if YOU are called to represent the kingdom, that's a miracle too! And I hope that would spark a bit of action, a bit of joy, and a lot of grace in your life.

Don't try to figure me out too much- I've stood the test of time. But do listen to the one who told you about me, and try to make my response to a shattered world look mild in comparison to yours. It would be great news to report at the next LPCA meeting- and we have great celebrations when lost lambs are found. Time for the meeting to start... Amen.