

The Hardest Lesson to Preach
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Lectionary: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

When I was rector in the Diocese of Los Angeles, a parishioner supplied me with Sermon Jokes. Usually, after morning prayer on Wednesdays, there was a smile on his face as he handed me my weekly supply. For some reason, there was an extra grin on his face as he handed me this joke.

The preacher's little boy inquired, "Daddy, I notice every Sunday morning when you first come out to preach, you sit up on the podium and bow your head in prayer. What are you praying about?"

The father explained, "I'm asking the Lord to inspire me so I can give a good sermon."

The little boy thought for a moment, then said, "Why doesn't He?"

This joke is especially true as we approach some of the most difficult passages in the Bible. One such difficult passage is from Jeremiah in which he writes: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." . . . O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!"

Earlier in chapter 8, Jeremiah demands that the people of Judah behold who they have become, wounded and afflicted. The political and religious leaders should no longer ignore the blood and the stench of the wounded and stop claiming magic words of healing. Jeremiah takes us back to the preacher's son in my opening joke, "Why doesn't God give you an inspiring and good sermon?" Jeremiah's difficulty is with the truth, how to see it for what it is. Anthea Portier-Young, an old testament professor at Duke University urges preachers to learn from Jeremiah's honesty as she states:

The preacher must listen to the testimonies, not just of those who are close, but also of those who are far. I speak of geography, but I also speak of identity, ideology, politics, culture, history. It is easy to listen to those who are like us, who share our views, and it is easy to mourn when they mourn. But why are those people so angry? What history separates "them" from "us"? What hard words do they have for me and my congregation? When we leave our echo chambers, we may grow in compassion. We will find there is more to grieve than we could ever have imagined.¹

The other difficult passage of scripture today is our Gospel lesson in which Jesus says, "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

One biblical commentator gives an easy explanation of this difficulty parable—namely, that the rich man had commended the dishonest steward for being a good business man because it is better to cut your losses and take what you can get." Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest and wonderful writer who passed away in September of 2013, states, however:

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-818-91-2>

The first thing to get off the table is the notion that this parable is simply a lesson in the virtue of humility. It is not. It is an instruction in the futility of religion – in the idleness of the proposition that there is anything at all you can do to put yourself right with God. It is a warning to drop all religious stances – and all moral and ethical ones, too – when you try to grasp your justification before God. It is, in short, an exhortation to move on to the central point of the Gospel: faith in a God who raises the dead. (p. 338)

I think Capon has one of the best interpretations of this difficult text. I highly recommend you read his book *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. One of Capon's primary themes is the radical grace of God. Capon summarizes:

The Lamb of God has not taken away the sins of some — of only the good, or the cooperative, or the select few who can manage to get their act together and die as perfect peaches. He has taken away the sins of the world — of every last being in it — and he has dropped them down the black hole of Jesus' death. On the cross, he has shut up forever on the subject of guilt: "There is therefore now no condemnation. . . ." All human beings, at all times and places, are home free whether they know it or not, feel it or not, believe it or not.

St. Paul, who once ironically saw many in hell and for him there was no universal grace, agrees with Capon's paradox as he writes to Timothy:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

This is radical theology coming from St. Paul because he was a Jew praying for the salvation of the political regime occupying Israel. Paul knew his theology was controversial to Timothy, hence Paul's admonition to Timothy: "This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour." Capon's Biblical commentary on today's Gospel is that lucky for us we don't have to deal with a *just* steward. A just steward would not be so forgiving. A just steward would topple the Greco-Roman Empire. A just steward would expect immediate payment in full of all debts.

With a pandemic, racial conflict, immigration woes, potential world wars, economic meltdowns, not to mention your own personal struggles of anxiety, broken relationships and being overwhelmed perhaps with care giving and work, we are more attuned to this Sunday's parable, especially Jesus' conclusion "You cannot serve God and wealth." But the difficulty of the Gospel is that Jesus seems to speak out of

both sides of His mouth. **Pause for lightning to strike because I appear to be disrespecting Jesus.** On one hand Jesus seems to be praising a dishonest manager, and on the other Jesus seems to be demanding that we cannot serve God and money.

I think the reason lightening does not strike me is because God has taught me that Jesus befriends the unrighteous, unworthy, dealers in untruth like you and I in order to lure us toward the way, the truth and life. If any of us think we are not the unjust steward in today's Gospel we fool ourselves like the delusional Pharisees. The Pharisees couldn't stand the fact that Jesus dined with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus should know better than that, or so the religious leaders thought. But Jesus knew what He was doing. If He does not dine with tax collectors and sinners, He cannot dine with us.

Jesus teaches us that Pharisees, folks like me who are religious leaders, are no better off than white collar criminals. As a matter of fact, the Pharisee is worse off; because while they're both losers—the pharisee and white collar criminal—at least the white collar criminal in Jesus' parable has the sense to recognize the fact and trust God's offer of grace. The point of Jesus' difficult teaching is that the Pharisee and the white collar criminal are both lost, and their only hope is someone who can raise the dead. (Capon, p. 340)

So, what is the good news? What Jesus is saying in this parable is that no human goodness is good enough to become God. No matter what we do, we cannot become God in doing it. (We can become like God and God became human so that we can become like God—but that is another sermon). The punch of today's parable is the good news that God will not take our anxious life, as we hold it, into eternity. God will take us into eternity through the power of Jesus' resurrection that is stronger than the stench, sting and paralysis of death.