

Earlier this week, Katie Fritchman wandered into my office with her Bible in hand. When I asked her what she was reading, she gave a somewhat pained expression and said it was the gospel for today.

When she said she was struggling to understand what it meant, I couldn't help but laugh. Not to be unkind, but in agreement. This is universally believed to be the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand.

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Its original meaning is either considered to be totally lost, so that even Luke was perplexed or the parable is believed to be so complex that the meaning just can't be grasped on a first or even second reading. The reason for all this confusion, is fairly obvious. By presenting his listeners with a deceitful man as a role model, Jesus seems to be commending immoral behavior, which just doesn't jive with everything else we know about Jesus. He may have challenged the religious leaders of his day, but his ethics were impeccable.

It's also next to impossible to see how the *Parable of the Unjust Steward* connects to the verses that follow, which hold up a standard for our treatment of money that's really tough to follow.

In trying to understand what Jesus was saying, people have used all kinds of strategies. The solutions include leaving out portions of the chapter or adding information that might make the whole thing more palatable.

There are theories that the name of the deed is misleading. He wasn't really doing that. Or he did that, but it wasn't really illegal. Or the whole process was described incorrectly. Luke didn't get the facts right when he told the story.

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In her book *Parables Unplugged*¹ Laurie Thurén writes that all of these interpretations assume that Jesus cannot recommend unethical or deceitful behavior. Except of course, that's exactly what he does. Thurén says, in all Biblical study, "fabricated evidence is to be suspected when the interpreter attempts to defend Jesus, to soften or explain away his [exaggerated] sayings or incomprehensible behavior. Since the author presents the problematic expressions and incidents, they must have a function, a purpose regarding the audience."

She goes on to say that we'll only understand the confusing behavior when we take it seriously, rather than trying to explain it away. We need to deal with the reality of what's there. A straightforward interpretation of the parable then, is the claim that stealing from the rich – and making friends by means of the stolen money- is acceptable in a crisis. But that sounds nuts. It would mean that Jesus was suggesting that if we get

¹Thurén, Laurie, *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context*, Fortress Press, 2014.

ourselves in enough trouble it's okay if we break the seventh commandment. There is nowhere else in any of the gospels where anything even remotely like that is to be found in what Jesus says or does. So, what's the answer?

To start, it helps to look at verses 1 to 9 in their larger context. Just prior to the parable, Jesus has been addressing the criticisms of the scribes and pharisees. They have been making snarky comments about him because of the company that he keeps. He has welcomed sinners and shared meals with them, so he must be a sinner as well and therefore, not to be believed when it comes to religious matters.

In response, Jesus tells the two parables we heard last week about the lost sheep and the lost coin.² And then he follows up with the parable of the prodigal son. He's no more caught his breath than he turns to address the disciples, but remember, the pharisees and the scribes are still there – listening to what Jesus will say next.

Thurén argues that the parable is not about money or theft, but instead, along with the previous three parables, this fourth one has to do with how to deal with the Pharisees' accusation of impropriety. It's still about whether Jesus has done anything wrong by being in community with sinful people.

The parable warns the audience that they may face a similar crisis, and they need to have a survival plan. Thurén says, "The emphasis of the story is neither on demonstrating *that* the hero managed to survive in the crisis nor that he reacted *quickly*." Thurén proposes that "the lengthy description of the *measures* he adopted focuses the audience's attention on this feature: the steward secured his future by an illegal use of his master's property." He used something that wasn't his to use. She goes on to say that the lesson to be learned is that, just as the steward solved his problem by using something that wasn't his – we should do the same. But rather than forgiving a monetary debt, we are in a position to share forgiveness and grace – which are not ours but belong to God.

Jesus can legitimately forgive the sins of all whom he encounters – he is the Master of that property – and we are the sinful stewards who are to do what we can to spread that grace around. The verses that follow the parable – the bit about serving God or money – fall right in line with the ethical Jesus we know and love.

It's as if he is saying - "okay, we were talking about the debt of sinfulness which God forgives, but in case you got confused – NOW we're talking about money and the importance of knowing what should come first." And in the verses that follow today's text, it says, "The Pharisees really loved money. So, when they heard what Jesus said, they made fun of him. But Jesus told them: You are always making yourselves look good, but God sees what is in your heart. The things that most people think are important are worthless as far as God is concerned."³

² Luke 15

³ *The Voice* paraphrase

The goal of the parable is to give direction to Jesus' followers. They are the ones he's talking to and when he is gone, they will be charged with declaring the forgiveness of sins. It is a task that has been passed down from one generation of Christians to the next.

In the Small Catechism, Luther writes about the Office of the Keys. He says, "God's people or holy Christians are recognized by the office of the keys exercised publicly." It is the power to forgive or retain sins that Christ gave to his followers.

The phrase "Office of the Keys," has always made me think of a weight that has been shackled to your leg- that our sinfulness is a ball and chain that we drag around and it keeps us from doing and being all that God intends. When we are forgiven, the keys loose us from those bonds. We experience freedom and life is transformed.

The keys are a gift that we are meant to use and just as the master accepted and commended the steward for his actions – even though it cost him money- -- God will praise those who take on a power that is only God's – the power to declare the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus is directing his friends to be as arrogant with God's grace as the steward was with his master's money. We are to distribute our Lord's property – his gracious love for the sake of the sinful, including ourselves.

Even though the steward is a sinner looking out for his own interests, he models behavior we can follow. By lowering the amount of other people's debts, he creates a new set of relationships. Now, instead of the debtors having a vertical relationship – with a hierarchy between those who have and those who have not. Those who lend and those who borrow - he creates relationships which are horizontal. By forgiving their debt, the steward makes friends. Friends who will remember his actions and be willing to give him aid in the future. They have a long-term connection.

So, what might that look like?

In Filipino culture there is a concept called *utang na loob*, which literally translated means an inner debt or a debt of inner gratitude. At its heart, *utang na loob* is an obligation to appropriately repay a person who has done you a favor. The favors which elicit the sense of *utang na loob* are typically those whose value is impossible to count. Or if you can count it up, it is somehow deeply personal. These are the favors that we know we cannot ever truly repay.

This sense of gratitude comes from a core value known as *kapwas* which says that we are all connected. We are all the same – no walls, no levels, no separations, no better, no worse. It calls everyone to see, not those things that make us different from one another, but those things that make us alike.

If you google *utang na loob* or *kapwa*, you'll find that Filipino psychologists and sociologists will tell you that this sense of universal gratitude is fading but it is an idea that Jesus calls us to embrace – not as a survival skill, but as a means to act out our faithfulness. When we see how we are one, we can treat each other with kindness and

humanity. When we are attentive to our relationships and cognizant of the need for forgiveness, we can graciously offer it, even if it is an act of *utang na loob*. Even if we know it cannot be repaid.

Telling the people that their sins were forgiven was the truly shocking thing that Jesus did that day. The Pharisees, the Scribes and the Rabbis – they would have been shocked, because as far as they were concerned, only God could forgive sin. They didn't believe that Jesus had that power or that he could give it to someone else. But Jesus gave it freely and abundantly and calls us to do the same.

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A few years ago, my sister and her daughter had one of those fights that seemed unresolvable. They said things that could not be taken back. They both stubbornly held their ground and months went by without their speaking to each other. Before the argument they had lived in the same house. After, they simply couldn't.

At a certain point, my sister decided she had to forgive her daughter. They might still disagree but if she was going to have a relationship with Jenn, she would have to back down. She would have to give the gift of *utang na loob*.

It made all the difference in the world.

Their relationship has been blessed in a thousand different ways. They have grown in their appreciation of each other. They have become gentler with one another and they are connected in a way that I had never imagined.

What would that look like for you? Is there someone who would benefit from your telling them that they are forgiven? Forgiven by God. Or forgiven by you? Do people recognize you as a Christian because of your use of the keys- because you share forgiveness with other people?

It's a simple thing - not always easy, but simple. We can take what God has in abundance and share it with someone in need. And they are everywhere, hungering for that sense of wellbeing that comes with forgiveness, longing to experience grace.

Christ has given you the keys, now is the time to use them.