

We're taking a short hiatus from our study of canon, but even in using a lectionary text this morning, we won't stray too far from *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*. You'll remember from our skimming of *Leviticus*, the emphasis on Jubilee, a cycle of neighborliness resulting in consistent restoration of family lands and the removal of crippling debts. And *Deuteronomy* reminds us to love God – our source, our center – with all our heart, soul, and strength.

Recency has helped our familiarity with *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*. The audience that Jesus instructs this morning is significantly more familiar with these texts – God's expectation of justice should be nothing new for them.

It's funny then that the subject of today's parable is often referred to as the dishonest or unjust steward. That's the thing about parables, though, the titles we assign them too often betray their meaning.

Our story. There's an absentee landlord. But landlord isn't a fitting description. This isn't the neighbor that rents out a spare room or a guest house. This is a lord with lots and lots of lots, so many lots in fact, that he most likely only visits his lands once a year. Think of the great European landowners of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – this is wealth and land ownership on the grandest of scales.

The landlord has a manager, or a steward, who attends to a specific section of the estate. This steward surveys the tenants, sharecroppers really, who live and work the vassal lord's lands in exchange for a large portion of the crops they produce: olives, wheat, and grapes. If there's a bad crop, the tenants fall further into the debt of the landowner.

Rich man. Lots of lands. Lots of riches. So many riches he needs help counting. Apparently, he's also got quite the network of correspondents. It comes to the landlord's attention that his manager is "squandering" his lands.

Webster's Dictionary defines squander as to "waste (something, especially money or time), in a reckless or foolish manner." It can also mean "allowing an opportunity to pass or be lost."

In my reading of today's text, the squandering, often labeled the dishonesty or unjustness of the steward, is this person's lack of proficiency in generating desired revenues or profits from the land. In other words, his boss has a lot, and his boss wants even more, and this steward didn't produce nearly enough. The steward is economically inefficient, but not necessarily malicious or nefarious.

Regardless, the steward gets wind of a looming pink slip. "I am not strong, and I am not a green thumb," he says, "so working rather than managing the land is not a good option for me. I also don't want to beg – I want the dignity of work."

The internal monologue continues.

"I am done as a manager. And it's gonna be hard for me to support myself. How then, can I prepare for my future, and address the urgency of this crisis, in a way that will meet the needs of myself and my family?"

He has a plan. He's still got the authority to act on his master's behalf. He'll visit all his clients, and offer to reduce their outstanding debts. By gaining their favor in the present, he'll ensure he's got a supportive

community in the future. And the master doesn't have any leverage to undo what his representatives assert.

We hear about the forgiveness of olive oil and wheat. Just so we are clear, these are huge sums. One tenant owes the master nearly 900 gallons of olive oil. Our family uses a 12-ounce container roughly every six weeks, and we pay nearly a dollar an ounce for it. The olive oil represents a massive amount of product and profit. By reducing these debts, the steward is making an oligopolist out of a monopolist. It's hardly tragic.

This drama is SO timely. As listeners, there's a piece of us that wants to be indignant with the behavior of the steward. "Those aren't his debts to forgive," we say. "It's not fair to the billionaire!" And yet the wealthy landowner has acquired all his massive wealth by ignoring the very statutes that define what is just: the Jubilee philosophy of *Leviticus* and the heart-focused love of God over all things. It's not unique to First Century Palestine.

Just this week, people have mixed feeling about Elon Musk. He shouldn't be forced to spend \$44 billion for Twitter just because he created and signed the offer to buy it, should he? Of course not! Especially not now that the company's stock price has tanked. Still, on what planet is there equity when someone has access to \$44 billion dollars in their checking account, yet most people don't even have \$44? And Thursday, the owner of Patagonia declared he is putting his \$3 billion company into a trust with all future proceeds to address climate change. The masses cheer, except those tax analysts who say this generosity skirts more than a billion dollars in taxes. And lest we forget the tension of grieving lost monarchs while simultaneously processing the trauma of colonialism and empire.

We live in a world that has equated commerce with justice. Somehow, we have prioritized the scarceness created by industry over the abundance created by God. The rules of profitability trump the rules of hospitality. We are eager to malign the two great sins of the manager: first his poor business savvy, and second, his forgiveness of debts that weren't his to forgive. And the greed has trained us to anticipate a stern reply from his master.

But the sternness never comes. The master commends his servant. *Well done, you! Good and quick thinking, shrewd even. You have figured out a way to create equity and future value among your neighbors.*

But maybe it's not really shrewdness the master is commending his steward for. Sure, that's what he says in front of an audience. That's what he says to save face. I think the master is commending the steward for recalibrating his thinking. The master has spent his entire life hoarding manna that has no future value.

Maybe it's not that the steward is a bad manager, but rather he's a good neighbor. We hear all the time that churches, and government entities, and non-profit organizations, and even households need to be run more like businesses. Efficiency and profitability are the order of the day.

But what if the manager of this land wasn't a capitalist, or an industrialist, or a land developer, or an entrepreneur. What if he just acted in ways that he believed would ensure that the land produced enough, and its inhabitants had enough, and that there was always a cycle of rest and renewal? What if his approach was one rooted in sustainability instead of consumption? What if the boss just disagreed,

and this manager thought he'd make one more lasting impact for his neighbors while he still could?

I would argue that the challenge of any day, whether its First Century Palestine or Twenty-First Century Charlotte, is weakening the narrative of power. Systems falsely claim to be the source of truth.

Pharaoh's captivity is certain, and while cruel, is still better and more secure than the uncertainty of freedom. Caesar's peace is lasting, his force final. Wealth is righteousness. Profitability is both polite and just. Enough is never enough. Who told you it's a matter of distribution? Nonsense, it's a matter of minimal resources! It's never been about man, it's all about manners. In God we trust, and trust us, we're telling you everything you need to know about God. Mainly, that God wants you to trust us.

The narratives become so powerful that the oppressed and the marginalized and the underprivileged unwillingly and subconsciously defend the behaviors of those who oppress, marginalize, and underprivilege them. The landowner dares to scold the tenants for the late rent he charges them to live on the very lands he has unjustly occupied. The landowner is also ready to chastise the manager for not making enough money on lands that should never have benefited the landowner in the first place.

We know the landowner is violating Torah. And yet we are ready to be empathetic, supportive even, in his unjust claims. Maybe, because, deep down, we fear that we too might lack enough, and at least the manager is one more person we won't have to compete with.

But God's world is different, God's kin-dom is SO much bigger than this tiny thinking. God's world – God's presence inbreaking and ever-present in our reality – God's world is the intersection of God, humanity, land, and all creation working in collaboration with one another. I think what this parable is telling us is that sometimes, in order to make God's world a reality, we must be shrewd – we must be willing to do injustice to unjust systems. In a world bent on proclaiming the false justice of loving self, loving profitability, and commoditizing land, we must do the injustice of loving God, loving neighbor, and sustaining lands. We must act with the urgent love, creativity, and innovation that crises of injustice demand. We must use every available resource at our disposal to create the kind of relationships where don't just love our neighbors for their present value to us, but we understand them to have value that transcends past, present, and future.

So...Sardis Baptist Church, go and be bad, really bad at the business of systems – be unjust and dishonest stewards. God's kin-dom – that place where justice and love endure, that place that sings the song of manna – God's kin-dom is dependent on your injustice toward the systems of this world. It seems today is as good as any to go and cause some good trouble. Amen.