

Luke 16:1-13

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Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And 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. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

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In our household, we have been known to enjoy a board game or a card game from time to time. These days it's pretty common for a deck of cards to show up after dinner, and over the past decade of my life, I have played an almost uncountable number of games of "Sorry. Of Phase 10". In recent years, of Settlers of Catan. I enjoy all of them. On any given night any of us might win any of them. And I am so grateful that we have by this point fully and truly graduated from the one game I'd love never to go back to again, which is Candyland.

Candyland is not a game that works well for grownups. It's not designed for us, I get that. First off, there's actually no decision-making anywhere in the game. You draw a card. The card tells you how many spaces you can go forward. Sometimes the spaces have different kinds of actions that result. And eventually, somebody gets to the end and wins. Because nobody makes a decision, once the deck is shuffled, the game is determined, so when you play it, all you're doing is finding out who has already won.

But also. If you are a grown-up. You have to play Candyland by a different set of rules. It sets it there in the directions. It turns out that there are some spots on the board that could send you backward. But. In the interest of saving time. The makers of Candyland have decreed that little kids don't have to do that. They can just ignore those cards. This means, and I want to say this carefully. You can have fun playing Candyland, especially if you're playing it with an awesome kid or an awesome grandkid. But Candyland is not a fair game. The deck is stacked in more ways than one. And because, as much as I like being a dad, I also like winning. I like having an even chance to win.

But in Candyland I don't. In Candyland there are different sets of rules for different sets of people. It feels profoundly unfair. And I want things to be fair. I bet you want things to be fair. We all love to say that we like things to be fair. Which makes this parable infamously difficult. The question that came in for this series to generate this particular sermon was in fact laser-set on the notorious unfairness of this parable. What the heck is up with the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. And why is it so unfair?

A rich man has a financial manager who gets accused of impropriety. The manager gets dragged before his boss and accused and starts to get understandably a bit nervous; after all, he's not really good for manual labor, and if the boss throws him out, he won't have a way to keep food on the table, so he devises a scheme. He goes around to the master's debtors and starts writing down their debts. Instead of 100, you

owe 50. Instead of 100, you owe 80, and so on. In the hopes that those debtors might repay the manager down the line by offering him a place to rest his head.

From a legal standpoint, there's only one way to read this story: this manager has stolen the wealth of the man who employs him, a pretty cut and dry violation of the seventh commandment. He's using his position of privilege to secure himself even up and against what would seem to be the very appropriate consequences for his actions. He is attempting to buy his own miscarriage of justice, and we can hardly wait for his boss to find out and for his comeuppance to come up. But instead. Because this is a parable. And reading a parable is like tossing a ball in the air and having it go sideways. Instead, the boss comes back and says, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And Jesus himself puts a little cap on it: Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

It's not fair. Why should this manager get rewarded for his dishonesty? And more to the point, it's infuriatingly unfair, because its very unfairness is the thing that Jesus himself seems to commend. Look, life itself isn't always going to be fair, I get that. Sometimes the deck is stacked, I get that. Some people are going to have more money. Some people are going to have more access. Some people with money and access are going to get away with things that other people won't. I don't like it. But I get it. But what I don't get. What I don't like. What boils my blood is Jesus showing up and giving this unfairness the big old Jesus seal of approval. I don't expect life to be fair. But I do expect God to be fair.

So what the heck is up with the parable of the dishonest manager? The first thing I would notice is that the manager isn't the only dishonest one in the story. "Dishonest wealth," our translation also uses, later in the text. One could only imagine how we might read the parable if only the editors had chosen for its title one dishonest protagonist over the other — the parable of the dishonest wealth would encourage I think a very different reading. And with much credit to our own Margaret Aymer, who is today preaching this same parable in a different pulpit and pointed out this exact turn to me, it would be entirely consistent with the original Greek language of this parable to translate the man's title as manager of dishonesty.

Manager of injustice. Manager of unfairness. In this translation it is not the manager who is himself dishonest; rather, it is only his fate to be the one trying to keep up with dishonesty, and injustice that has permeated the world around him, an injustice in which the gap between those who have and those who have not has taken over. Debt has buried everyone in this story in a world of isolation and pain. The system is unfair. But our hero. At least he's managing. And perhaps as he begins to break the rules, something of the true fairness of God begins to peak through the clouds.

About a decade ago, at the age of 27, a Pensacola Man named Trenton Copeland stood before a federal judge and heard his sentence read. He had been found guilty of possession and the intent to distribute cocaine — the third time, for him, that he'd been found guilty of a nonviolent drug offense. Unfortunately for him, in the federal system, the prosecutors had taken advantage of something called Section 851 enhancement, which, when deployed, required judges to impose mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines of at least 20 years. In Copeland's case, at the age of 27, having committed no violent crime, he was sentenced to life in federal prison without the possibility of parole.

There is nothing in the protection of Copeland's case that is, at first, unjust. He is rightly convicted of crimes which he did commit, a fact he himself admits. He broke the rules. He knowingly broke the rules. And the judge who sentenced him did so not in defiance of the rules for sentencing guidelines but in fact in a full-throated embrace of them. And yet somehow in this persistent following of the rules, some broader injustice has occurred. At the age of 33, five years into his life sentence, Copeland writes an open letter, eloquently describing his dreams of what he would be in his community if ever he could be released. If ever he could be free. If ever he could pay his debt. The prison system has done its job; it has reformed him into precisely the sort of member of society we should all hope to be. But in so doing it has not also reformed itself. And so

even in his reformed state, he is still stuck in an unreformed world, the rest of his life laid out behind bars.

The good news for Trenton Copeland came in late January of 2017 when his name was included among the very last batch of Presidential Pardons given prior to the inauguration. Trenton Copeland was made a free man and remains a free man. He served his time. He paid his debt. But it was only by a suspension of justice that justice could be served. His was to owe 50, not 100. Or 30, not 50. Or five years, instead of life. His was to owe just a bit less. And to therefore be freed. And to therefore be welcomed again into the arms of his neighbors wherein he rests still. With thanksgiving for all the allies, and all the attorneys, and all the activists who worked on his behalf, who worked tirelessly in a maze of courtrooms and conference tables, who worked tirelessly for justice inside an oft-unjust system. None of them can erase the injustice. But at least they could manage it for a while.

I wonder if this is some glimpse of the true fairness of God, not a fairness in which everyone gets the same chance and everyone plays by the same rules and the deck is never stacked. Rather God's fairness overflows with mercy. And God's fairness overflows with forgiveness. And God's fairness overflows with grace. And in God's fairness, it is of course the most vulnerable and the most forgotten, and the most at-risk, to whom the most is given. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, Jesus says. For the sake of fairness, it might as well say. Blessed are those who are persecuted in the name of fairness. For theirs is the kingdom of Heaven, where all the candy is, and where no child should ever have to go backwards.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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