

**SERMON- Proper 20 (C)**

**Charles R. Cowherd**

Amos 8:4-7

Psalms 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

**St. Timothy's (Herndon)**

**September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025**

**Luke 16:1-13**

**OPENING:**

*Last week* we heard the fabulous parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, And right before this passage, Luke give us the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

*This week* we hear the Parable of the Unjust Steward—

the most difficult, perplexing, hard to understand, hard to preach parable in the New Testament.

*Last week*, many of us were up at our Shrine Mont Retreat, enjoying this mountaintop weekend and being transfigured by all that such an experience has to offer.

*This week*, having come down from the Mountain (like Moses with tablets!), with all this energy and information about how to be God's church, we find a world positively on fire. Violence, division, discord, you name it.

Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf;

our country is worshipping something approximate to that.

Now is the time, one might imagine, for the Rector to tell everyone to clear out, for the Seminarians to take their place, guest preachers to take their seat, and for him to explain this lesson in all its glory,

in the context of 2025,

to the good people of St. Timothy's,

to the millions, perhaps dozens, watching on YouTube,

to the poor newcomers who have wandered into this church

looking for peace and hope.

My confession: I don't... fully... understand this passage either.

And so, I am going to come up short.

But I am going to give it my best shot and, I feel like this bears repeating for whatever reason: I am so thankful to be standing in this pulpit, to be a leader at this church, for my family to be members of this congregation.

**PARABLES:**

The first thing is just a bit about how we read Scripture and how we (quote unquote) "understand" it.

We strive, as human beings living in this modern world, to "get" things, to "use"

them for a purpose.

We treat knowledge as a commodity, that we conquer through our intelligence and determination.

So we do that to the Bible. I do it, you do it, we all do it.

We want to grasp, to hold on to the meaning so that we can “deal” with it, make it succumb to our powers.

What if, instead, we don’t try to *tame* what we read, instead we let a text stand before us and we let it breathe and be. Such that... we don’t “under stand” it... we “stand under” its authority, so that we allow our life and perception of reality to be changed, maybe slowly and unconsciously, by this and the other parables.<sup>1</sup>

Think about it. Consider your relationship with a really good movie, a really good book, a really good poem. Your *favorite* movie, book, or poem You don’t “get” them. You don’t understand the play “Hamlet” or your favorite Bob Dylan song ... rather, it gets you. It understands you. We allow that to happen... sometimes... with great literature or music, and we actually do with Scripture as well... sometimes... Psalm 23, the Beatitudes, maybe some of the more famous parables.

Scripture, ultimately does not ask “will you agree” with me?

It asks: “will you join with me?”

Maybe that’s why it is called a “passage”—we move through it.

Bewildered and scandalized and perplexed and enlivened.<sup>2</sup>

I could go on and on about this idea, but I think I got you,

I think that is why you are here. You are willing to (kind of) *suffer* this “Terrible Parable” and the Book of Amos and all the other stuff in the Bible because you trust Jesus, you trust the Church, you trust... me... to guide you with it.

If you open your heart to it, that it will work on you.

Just one quote to kind a sum it up then, this is from Barbara Brown Taylor:

She writes “The Bible is not an object for me; it is a partner, whose presence blesses

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<sup>1</sup> Hays, Richard B. 1996. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: a contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 301.

<sup>2</sup> Willimon, William H. 2016. *Pastor: the Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. (Revised Edition) Nashville: Abingdon, 126, 128.

me, challenges me, and affects everything I do.”

And... “My relationship with the Bible is not a romance but a marriage, and one I am willing to work in all the usual ways.”<sup>3</sup>

## UNJUST STEWARD

So back to this parable, remember it?

The story goes: A Rich man has a shrewd, Unjust Manager.

He fires the manager for being shady and says: “You have an hour to pack up your things, and turn in your key card and your laptop. And you better settle all your accounts by COB.”

The manager says: “What am I going to do? I can’t dig ditches, I am too proud to beg, but I think I have a *clever* solution... I am going to make ‘nice nice’ with the debtors because then, maybe, they will reward me when I am unemployed.”

And so he lets them off the hook of a portion of their debts, shorting his master a percentage of the owed wheat and oil.

Pause: Some basic problems in morality and ethics there.

Then the Master further confuses things by, surprisingly, saying: “Great job (clap clap), I like what you did there. ‘Game recognizes game’, so to speak. See you out there.”

What? Huh?

Take a step back:

Parable of the Prodigal Son: one can get behind, it’s hard to do, but, okay, if a family member squanders your life-saving, you invite them back in with a party

Parable of the Lost Sheep: Same thing, I get it, not the way I would run *my* sheep farm, but you just really love your sheep and so you would go out to save the one even at the expense of the 99.

## SHIFT:

But what about this one?

This is what I have come to “under stand” ... to “stand under” this parable after this week of living with it.

And it has taken me being in a relationship with it for that time.

To be married to this parable, so to speak, to allow it to work its way into me.

In this story, a man dies: the Unjust steward is pronounced dead, He is fired. He is ashamed and buried as nothing. He then riser and decides to raise others.

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1993. *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge: Cowley, 56.

In that process, he seems to be the sort that hangs out with sinners, those that are not respectable, the sort that might be willing to dine with tax-collectors, and prostitutes.

*That* sounds familiar.

The unjust steward is a Christ-figure, an allegory for Christ himself.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is the Clever Manager, the unjust Steward disgraced and despised.

That is hard to wrap your head around. It would make more sense if the rich man were to say: “it is wrong to deal unfairly with your clients. They deserve to owe their full share, and I deserve to receive it.”

But remind yourself that, so often in the parables, the word “deserves” or “fair” is turned upside down.

Time and time again. People don’t get what they deserve, what they are due, what they worked for. They get, instead, God’s grace.

## **ST. TIMOTHY’S**

Okay all that happened in that parable. Jesus is pushing the envelope here, deliberately and provocatively, because he just did not cotton the idea that doing what the world says is just, and is the way to go.

He was the Unjust Steward.

He was a criminal, crucified for his actions. He said your righteousness is not going to move the needle, and your money..... Well... you cannot serve two masters.

One more step: Let’s place it here in the life of this church and see where it goes. Imagine if you had as your spiritual leader, someone who hung out with lowlifes, the homeless, people with brown skin, Hispanics, and Muslims. He drove a motorcycle, was a divorcee, had a child who had died, his family of origin were alcoholics.

He was, in short, not respectable. He suffered, was unconcerned with appearances. He told the Treasurer and the Vestry that the Budget would be okay, numbers be damned, don’t worry about it.

Are you following? That Father Brad lived his life in a cruciform pattern, that he did not care about respectability, or whether he dressed in drag at Shrine Mont, or allowed gays and lesbians full inclusion, that like Jesus: “He became sin for us sinners, weak for us weaklings, lost for us losers, and dead for us dead.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 302-309.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 307-308

I am thankful for the example of Brad's life, but even then we, you and I, have to be careful.....

The question for us needs to be:

How do we structure our lives as a church and as individuals?

Are we unjust and inefficient?

Or do we follow the ways of the world and reward the respectable and righteous.

How do we as a trust treat one another and the stranger in our midst?

How do we spend our money, our Mammon?

OR do we believe in a Just Steward? That someone who operated tit for tit, an eye for an eye, who would be the most FAIR way of deciding things, but we actually would not in a million be desirous of that.

The question then: do we believe that Jesus is the Unjust Steward willing to go to any lengths to save us, including apparently shady business deals, but most pathetically, a criminal's death on the cross.

We need parables like this to push us in that direction, to make us see the "Crumminess" of Christ, that goes in our place to save us.

**AMEN**