

Doing The Right Thing

Year C

Season of Pentecost

Sunday Between September 18 and September 24 Inclusive

September 19, 2010, Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Read the Bible passage: [Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#), The Message; or [Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Read the Bible passage: [Luke 16:1-13](#), The Message; or [Luke 16:1-13](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Faith-provoking, historical insights into the lesson by [David Ewart](#), [Luke 16:1-13](#).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this sermon.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Note: This sermon was preached on September 23, 2007 at Edwards (Knox) United.

All of us live in a taken for granted universe. We see this in our speech, in folk sayings, the so called common sense ideas that we operate out of, and never think about. It is a kind of, "this is how it is, this is the way things are." They are the ways we get through the day without thinking, for there is work to be done, food to prepare, sleep to catch up on, and fun to squeeze in. Most of us never think about or question this taken for grantedness. We assume this is how the world is. Our acting becomes habitual based on these concepts.

We run on automatic pilot and, often this is a good thing, and it can be dangerous. Once and while events catch us short. Some idea or event calls into question this taken for grantedness. Some dramatic happening confronts us and we wonder what is it all about? In the moment when things seem to be not how we assumed life would be, we fall back on some habit of the heart. We revert to some adage to carry us through the difficulty or joy. We don't question the adages and when we don't they can be dangerous.

We have all heard and used expressions that reflect our unreflective assumptions.

- "What goes around comes around."
- "He is a self-made man."
- "The good die young."
- "God looks out for fools and angels."

Some of these expressions are innocent, some are helpful and others are destructive to our common good. "Self-made man" is an example for no one is an island - we get to where we are through the support of others, and that support can value up our own energy.

Literary devices like the parables and like some of the new movies, reverse the expectation of the viewer or hearer. Jesus went around challenging the taken for granted views of life. He challenges the stated and unspoken traditions that projected themselves as the ultimate views about the nature of reality. His teaching relativized all claims to the truth. His was a protest against absolutizing our relative claim, that this (whatever the *this* is) is the truth about reality.

This reversal of expectation gets us to the center of the moral issues of our time. Brian Johnson, in *Macleans*, makes this point about the current crop of movies that use violence. They reverse our expectation - the issue is, what does the violence do to those who commit it? It is not a celebration of violence, it is a vision of a hunted soul of a nation at war. They are epic visions of an America that has lost its moral compass. So the stories, like the parable, makes us sit up and examine ourselves.

Were you not taken a bit aback with the shrewd manager? A little troubled that Jesus praises him? It troubled the earliest Christian interpreters like Luke. They attempted to moralize it. Most of us, rightly, find the activity less than honest. Yet he is the hero.

In Jesus' story the shrewd manager is an invitation to his hearers to take a look at how they were living as God's people. The manager is praised because he gets the better of the owners who still considered themselves faithful followers of the Torah because they kept to "the letter of the law" - they didn't charge interest in the form of money. But the story points out that they had completely forgotten its spirit which was not to charge interest on a loan at all. Their responsibility was not to make it more difficult yet their actions sent people into poverty. Their actions created more hardship because it was the poor that needed loans and interest burdened them even more.

An illustration of how this worked, and still works is a story, from McNab Township. Laird McNab brought his village over to the Ottawa valley and gave them land. However, they became indentured serfs because they could never pay back the Laird, for he had added several hidden costs. In the end they rebelled and refused to pay any more.

The story points out that what can seem like injustice - the manager's act of reducing the debt owed his master - can actually lead to greater justice. The manager eliminates the interest from what is owed, thereby returning to the spirit of the law.

There are lots of rogue stories that invite us through negative activity to call us to justice. Think of the Robin Hood story. Remember the Sting? I like the Hustle on C.B.C. because the rogues always catch the greedy and mean spirited people in their own web of conceit. We root for them because they expose the underlying greed that moves our society - what can we get for nothing. They attack those who attack the weak.

These stories and the parable of the shrewd manager invites us to think about how we act in the world toward others to create greater justice and harmony and goodness. The parable is to shake us to our foundations and to question our habit of going through existence half awake. It is a wake up call. It strips us bare of any conceit that suggests we have figured out the world. It exposes our attachment to rules and regulations rather than asking what is needed to create well-being. They force us to develop a moral vision

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May the Lure be with you

that goes beyond enlightened self interest. The parables throw us onto the Grace of God. God is the dreamer of the common good and we are the builders of the world where the common good is achieved.

Jeremiah speaks to this situation of uncertainty and dislocation. He suggests that it is in God that we find a balm for our healing. In God is healing. God is within every event we experience, in every relationship we have, in those moments when our world is made new, when our automatic pilot is transformed and we see the world in new ways. This is an affirmation that in every event, even when we don't see it, there is a remnant of the good to be teased out. We use our creativity to make it more vivid. God's healing is a lure we find within our world, it is within those histories and ideas that make this world a better place. This healing allows us to deconstruct our sacred cows so we can reconstruct and create viewpoints that carry us toward the common good. It takes discernment and commitment to achieve this common good. It takes shrewdness to find in our world the levers that can push us in more cooperative directions.

Folks, the good news is that the questioning church is the vital church. We can live with uncertainty. With commitment we can be a vital force within our society. This is a communal project because when we act and think together we see things that one person may have missed. In shared life each of us grows in confidence and a sense of being loved. Being loved we collectively build one another up and can challenge the taken for granted notions that get us into trouble. To have this heart takes prayer. That is why every week we pray for our world and one another.

The prayers of the people bring the balm of healing to our world. God values up our concerns, we share then through the web of relationships that create our world. God is working for compassionate justice with our feedback and contributions. Every act flows through God and back to us. Prayer is feedback loop. It leads to healing for each of us and thus healing for the world.

Here are two things we can do as a prayer.

- Consider bringing items for the food bank next Sunday so they can be part of the Thanksgiving decorations and then taken to the food bank. That way we can share our good fortune and bounty with those who are not as fortunate.
- Consider switching the coffee and tea that you drink at home and that we have a coffee time at church to Fair Trade products. Fair Trade means that the growers have been given a living wage for their product. And we can now get Fair Trade teas and coffees locally at the Hot Cup Cafe at the corner of the main street in Russell.

Prayer is our acting in the world. Each action is a prayer. Each touch of kindness is a prayer. All is gathered up in God, to be given back to us and to be share in that web of relationships which is our world. We let loose the balm of God's healing.

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