

So this parable is a little puzzling. A rich man discovers that his steward has squandered the resources he was supposed to be protecting. Maybe he just put his feet up while the crops rotted or he skimmed some off the top, we don't exactly know. But whatever form it took, his negligence was enough for this rich man to fire him. The steward was lucky not to be headed for jail but still he is headed for disgrace, and poverty. He doesn't have any illusions about the quality of his work. The future he faces is grim. He's not strong – no manual labor for him. And, he's proud. Just the thought of begging makes his hands sweat. What can he do? What will become of him?

They say, there is nothing like the prospect of hanging to focus the mind – the same is apparently true for unemployment. The steward's mind races and he hits upon a plan. He will go to all those who owe his master money and will give them huge discounts. They will be so grateful, he will never have to eat at home again. So, he puts this plan into action and the rich man hears about it. And here's where the puzzling part is: instead of calling the cops and denouncing his former steward, he praises him, calls him shrewd, using the Greek word that could also be used for wise.

And we say: what the heck? What kind of a master is this who commends his Steward for ripping him off, who compares the Steward's shrewdness favorably against the children of light. It's not only confusing – it's unsettling. Is Jesus telling a story where a thief is praised for his cunning? Is the rich man complimenting the Steward even while the Steward is, in effect, stealing from him? Scholars have devised many convoluted explanations for this parable so what we hear is not really what we hear, but the obvious and difficult meaning is that the Master was impressed by the Steward's cleverness. So, is this true? Can it be that the Bible condones embezzlement? Shouldn't this Steward be derided and run out of town? Why is he then free, and enjoying the approval of his former boss? This isn't the kind of story we want. We want the villain vilified. We expect reprisals, punishment, comeuppance.

I've been thinking about that desire a lot lately, about how we brand each other, how we want to look at each other. I, like all of you, have public figures I like and public figures I don't. When I hear something negative about those on my 'don't like' list – a part of me celebrates – yes, celebrates. It is just more evidence that my opinion is correct that they are bad, horrible, evil, irredeemable. Part of me turns on the TV hoping to hear something negative – something damning. This is not my best self – as they say in car commercials, don't try this at home. No, this is not my best self. The more evidence I get that supports my opinion the more justified I feel about dismissing their ideas, ignoring their viewpoint, not listening. And we wonder why our country is so divided.

Anyway, what I find even more disturbing is how I react when what I hear is not outrageous, when I hear wisdom or compassion coming from someone I've labeled a numbskull. I don't want the other side to be nuanced, thoughtful. I want my 'opponents' to be all evil, completely stupid, irredeemable, worthless, despicable – deplorable.

I discovered this same dynamic as I am reading a book about the uprising at Attica prison in the 1970's. I know I had a fairly fixed notion of what a prison riot was like. And it **was** pretty gruesome, but not always how I expected. I was ashamed at my surprise when I read of how carefully the inmates protected the hostages, the correction officers, two inmates even risking their lives to get a badly injured guard out so he could get medical attention. These were criminals, but not the way I expected to see them. I was humbled when, in the midst of this chaos and carnage, the inmates found beauty, when on that first night in the exercise yard, they found themselves lying on the ground looking up at the stars. Yes, thieves and murderers lay on the ground that night, drug dealers and embezzling stewards. And the stars shined for them all. And, Jesus lay there alongside them.

The steward, the politicians, criminals, we like to paint them with a broad brush. If they are all bad we can denounce them, lock them away, mistreat them. What are you doing, Jesus, letting that

guy get away with theft? And even worse, what are you doing praising him for his cleverness? Do you not see that he's not repentant, he's just scared?

And this is where the gospel gets difficult. This steward is a bad guy, there's no other interpretation. His only remorse is about his future. We can look, but we are not meant to ferret out the good hidden somewhere within him. We do that to find something that makes the steward deserving. But, he isn't. And we are meant to include him in the good news anyway. If Jesus came to show us how to live, shouldn't that include castigating those who break the law. Jesus should not be telling us how to cheat. We want Jesus out there calling the wicked to account, so we can stand behind him and yell, "yeah, what he said ". It's great to be on the side of the right. Until, of course, Jesus turns around to us.

Looking at us, looking at the Steward, looking at thieves, Jesus looks at us all the same. Jesus didn't come as a moral lesson to us; he came to show us who God is and how God loves us. No one likes to think of Jesus on the side of the crooks. But he was right up until they hanged beside him on the cross.

As well as showing us one more instance where the deplorable are included, there is a lesson the rich man shows us. He has a lazy good-for-nothing steward squandering his property. God has a creation which praises him without joy, children who go through the motions, let's say they squander the opportunity to live praising God with their lives.

The Rich Man can see that the steward is never going to stop squandering what he has been given to oversee – so the Rich Man takes it away from him. And, voila, presto-chango, the Steward gets off his keester and devises a plan. The Rich Man hears about it and says, "there, that's what I'm talking about!" See how clever you can be when it is your future that's at stake. That's what how I want you to think about my resources, my future.

When I moved into my first apartment, in my selfish 20s, my roommate and I needed to divvy up the two closets – one conventional and one, larger, but with a strange configuration. We flipped or something and I got the conventional closet and she got the larger one. As we unpacked, she was having trouble figuring out how to use it. She asked for my help and I gave her some vague suggestion about folding things, putting in hooks, or something unimaginative. She was unhappy. I think I thought she might leave, so I volunteered to switch closets, which we did. I studied my new closet and figured out how I could put a rod and cubby holes in it – that it could actually hold a lot of stuff. When my roommate saw it – she said, 'oh, so that's what you can come up with when it's YOUR closet. I asked you for help and you gave me nothing.' Lots of apologies and another closet switch later and we were friends again. It was amazing how my wheels turned when they were turning for me.

That's how the rich man felt, that's how God feels when our energy and cleverness is squandered on things that don't last