

Some weeks back, when I was with our group in Scotland, I received a phone call in the middle of the night.

I had, as you might imagine, instructed the church staff that I would have my phone and could be called for emergencies, and I had also thoroughly threatened my family in order to prevent them from texting me at 50 cents a text or calling me at \$2.50 a minute respectively.

So when the phone rang at 3:30 a.m. I woke up abruptly. It registered with me that the phone number had an area code of 7-0-4, which is the area code for Charlotte, my hometown and where my parents still live.

I scrambled to answer the phone.

“May I speak to Dr. Mullis,” queried a pleasant voice at the other end.

“This is he.”

Immediately, I had red flags going off everywhere, because nobody calls me “Dr. Mullis.”

The only person who calls me “Dr. Mullis” is my insurance agent and that’s because she knows I’m minister and I’ve subsequently been unable to convince her to use my first name.

“Dr. Mullis, I’m calling on behalf of Wells-Fargo to tell you that we can lower your interest rate on your mortgage at no cost to you.”

“Well, at present you’re costing me \$2.50 a minute because I’m in Scotland. Can you save me money in two weeks?”

Something about this parable reminded me of the experience...

Perhaps it is that most of us know that businesses are in business to make money. That's reasonable and right and we should expect it.

So when the bank called me to offer to change my mortgage, I assumed that they meant it to make money – either directly, or by retaining my business.

There are intangibles at work as well – goodwill for instance – as they perhaps hope that having had previous mortgages with them that I will continue to.

I completely understand where that steward was coming from in the parable today.

I get it. When times are tough, you do what it takes to retain business. You do what it takes to retain connections even if the business goes kaput.

It's all part of the game.

It makes perfect sense to me.

But some folks are scandalized by this parable. They are scandalized because it seems so inherently unfair – and frankly, like the rightful owner of the business is getting fleeced.

I also get that some folks slightly enjoy knowing that the man is getting fleeced, but what really gets folks lit up about this parable is that Jesus appears to approve of the business practice!

As the story goes, you know the business manager slashed at what was owed by the debtors. And yet the master, the business owner, commended him on the practice as the story went along.

And yet it sounds a little bit like theft.

There are some who attempt to get around this by suggesting that the business manager, the steward, was only slashing at his own commission. But identifying the business manager as “dishonest,” sort of belies this approach.

No, he's shrewd. He's canny. He makes a smart move. He calculates and then he gambles, and it appears that he wins.

Frankly, as a rather pragmatic person myself, I'd rather see this parable as an approval of pragmatism.

"Shrewd" and "Saint" may not often appear in the same phrase, but they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, I have met many shrewd saints through the years. They are folks who can squeeze maximum value out of what is entrusted to their care. I've known soup kitchen managers who could make delivery truck managers blush with their language and turn around and serve up a bowl of hospitality on behalf of Jesus with smile on their faces. Yes, I'm thinking of one person in particular. She's a shrewd saint.

Most of us won't, indeed, can't do that.

I like Fred Craddock's bent on this, though. He writes,

"The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem...the realism of these sayings is simply that life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week Christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday School class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice and feed the neighbor's cat."¹

True, no?

It sounds a lot like my life. Maybe it sounds like yours?

¹ Craddock, Fred. Luke in *Interpretation*. Louisville: W/JKP, 1990. P192

Jesus said, “whoever is faithful in little is also faithful in much.”

Still, there’s the problem of that money.

A parable is just a story. It’s a story told to make a point, and I think Jesus has two of them here.

First, little things matter.

Second, people don’t forget when big things happen.

I saw a video this week from Thailand. I could only read the subtitles, but the story didn’t need language.

A small boy was caught stealing medicine – painkillers – from a pharmacy. As the boy is caught and held in the street, a kindly by-stander intervenes. He wants to know why the boy has stolen the medicine in the first place.

It is for his mother. “Is your mother sick,” the man asks? The boy nods.

The man pays the pharmacist, places the medicine in bag, shouts to his daughter to bring soup, places that in the bag as well, and sends the boy on his way.

The next scene is many years later. The kindly by-stander is once more working in his restaurant, serving up food, when he falls to the floor having suffered some sort of trauma.

As we see the medical scenes, his daughter who once served up the soup, is shown lingering at his bedside leafing through medical bills. The sums are astronomical.

The camera pans to a youngish physician going through films of brain scans and x-rays and the like.

The closing scene shows the bill with zero sum and the notation written onto it, “This bill was paid in full thirty years ago with a bottle of painkillers and a bag of soup.”

Little things matter.

Big things matter.

When Jesus told this parable I have a hunch he was thinking, “Little things matter. Its from the little things that big things come.”

You see, Jesus got the big picture.

All expenses have been paid. God has done it all. Once we get that, once we take it in and make it who we are that God isn't sitting around holding an account over us, we're free.

We're free to love and be the people that God created us to be.

And here's something else on Jesus' mind, I suspect, and it is this: grace is unfair. It just is. Some of us work really hard and God loves us just the same as those who won't get off their backsides.

It's offensive. It's as offensive as slashing accounts.

But there's one other thing – it's pragmatic.

Because if you want grace to reach as many people as possible, you don't go looking for ways to limit it.

I get that “pragmatic” and “Jesus” are not words that are commonly associated with one another, and to be clear, Jesus never says it's okay to take a utilitarian approach people and to the problems of the world and do just what it takes to get by and stop, but he did get that grace has to have a starting point. The good isn't the victim of the perfect when it comes to grace.

The kingdom of God, of course, has a perfect vision of God's shalom, or peaceable kingdom, as I keep talking about it, and that is always what God's redemption is working

toward and that is always what Jesus' expectation is. But sometimes it *does* come in fits and starts. Sometimes we start with small to get to big. We start with what we *can* in order to get to what we *dream*.

I know that most of us are a little worried about the idea that we might, ourselves, be called upon to give an accounting of our lives.

One of my favorite stories one of you has shared with me was of the week that a visiting preacher talked about judgment – and you called my predecessor up and said, “I’ve been trying to get away from the whole judgment thing my entire life, I found Morningside, and now all the sudden I’m hearing about judgment again!”

Here’s the thing: we can look critically at what we’re doing for the kingdom; we can give an accounting, as it were, without being afraid. God’s judgment is never cruel and it is never hateful. God’s judgment is the fundamental belief that in the end, it is going to come around right.

And when we get that – the debt, if there was one – was paid years ago, that, in the words of Johnny Cash, “The old account was settled long ago,” and we’re free.

We’re free to be what God wants us to be. We’re free to live as God’s image in the world.

Some years ago, a friend of mine, a retired kindergarten teacher, brought me a book. She said to me, “We’re all the time telling children that they are special, and we’re working to build up their self-esteem. But we never tell them what to have self-esteem *for*.

But, she said, “I’ve found this wonderful book and it says it so well.”

I’d like to share it with you.

“Each time a child is born, the world changes.

When you were born, there was a new person for your family to love and care for.

And because of you, there is one more person who can love and care for others.

Because of you, there is one more person who will grow and learn and one more person who can teach others.

Because of you, there is one more person to share with. And there is one more person who can share feelings and ideas as well as things.

Because of you, there is one more person who needs help and one more person who can help others.

When you help, care, share, and listen, you are being kind.

And when two people help, care, share, and listen to each other, they are friends.

When people from different countries help, care, share and listen to one another,

It is called peace.

Even something as big and important as peace begins with something small and precious.

It might begin...

Because of you.”²

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Hennessy, BG. Because of You. Candlewyck Press, 2005