

The Top Ten Reasons Today's Gospel Makes Me Cry
Dorothy Whiston
New Song Episcopal Church
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Amos 8:4-7, Ps. 113, 1Tim. 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13

In honor of censored comedians everywhere, I thought I'd do a "top ten" list for my sermon this morning. However, as I told Jerry and Laura the other evening at Big Grove, my top 10 list is titled, "The Top Ten Reasons Today's Gospel Makes Me Cry." Hang with me.

Some of my tears are of deep sadness. And fear. Some are related to the sorrow that comes with culpability. And some of my tears are bursting forth with gratitude and hope. Today's gospel encapsulates so much of what is so very wrong in our world, in the Church, and in my own way of life. And, thankfully, God's unending love, faithfulness, mercy, and promise are also written all over it. Just as they are written all over everything.

So, on to my top 10 list.

#10, which mostly just irks me. Calling today's reading "The parable of the Dishonest (or Unjust) Manager", as it's usually referred to, betrays a bias of modern, Western Christians. This interpretation moralistically sides with "the system" and denigrates the manager, even though it's a pretty ambiguous story. Especially in the original Greek. What's not ambiguous is Jesus's declaration at the end: "You cannot serve God and wealth." Ok, then. . .

On to **#9** – The "system" we're all caught up in. For those who say Jesus was not political, I beg to differ. Jesus, and the prophets, like Amos, before him, were all about *polity*. They cared deeply about the social structures that define relationships between people. And were most passionate about the two intertwined components of politics they saw as most oppressive: Top-down social structures – be they civic or religious -- and economic systems that promote accumulation of wealth for a few and poverty for the masses.

Oppressive then and oppressive now! Oppressive to those marginalized at the bottom, to those caught in the middle, and to those proudly – and blindly -- teetering at the top. Some commentators refer to our current American economic system as "plantation capitalism," pointing out how it has tainted our fragile democracy from the git-go. Just look around -- woe is us!

Which leads me to **#8**, and the tears of waking up to what deep doo doo we're in. Just like the manager in today's parable, many of us are beginning to see our economic system is no longer tenable. It's not sustainable for human life and it's not sustainable for the planet. It's destroying everything, and at an accelerating pace. And our body politic is pretty darn fragile, too. Which is frightfully overwhelming! God help us!

And God does, but even that leads to tears. It's not fun to acknowledge my more or less conscious and willing collusion with such a corrupt system: **#7** on my list. I began to have pretty serious doubts about our American economic system – and the very existence of any so-called “free market” – when I first studied it in high school. We're talking 60 years ago when I began to see the dangers of putting profits before people.

And yet, as a child of the professional – or managerial -- class, I've gladly benefitted from capitalism from my birth to this day. While “making it” professionally or financially has not been much of a focus in my life, I've always taken for granted the financial security and status that comes with being solidly middle class.

It came to me this week that this is likely part of what Jesus meant in our recent Gospel about the need to “hate” our families to be his disciple. Very few of us – even great philanthropists -- share our wealth without regard to kinship. I'm guilty, both on the receiving and the giving end of that. It's most all in the family. And I can barely imagine it otherwise, even if I try to be somewhat generous along the way.

All in all, I've not risked very much to try to resist, let alone change, either our economic system or our institutionalized, and yes, pretty much capitalist religious system. Christian Capitalism is as much a non sequitur as Christian Nationalism. The tears of cooptation and collusion with the evil done on my behalf really do sting as much as those wept for harm I've directly caused.

Which brings me to **#6**. Today's gospel is the social, structural parallel to the more personal, family-based story of the Prodigal Son which comes right before it. Both stories call us to repentance – to change our minds and hearts and to amend our ways. Personally first, and hopefully collectively as we mature as Christians.

Mercifully, God knows our first steps toward repentance will likely be as self-interested as not, and halting at best. Rather than a complete turn-around, most of us will tentatively side-step systems of oppression where and how we can, like our manager friend. But it still matters, anytime and anyway we step away from the transactional world and enter instead into God's relational world of indiscriminate, generous reciprocity.

Here, my tears begin to be a mix of misery and of relief. Even an inkling of hope.

Which leads to **#5**. This being human is a huge gift and a huge challenge! We are not powerless. Nor are we alone. We are created as social beings with enormous intelligence and even bigger hearts. That's simply who we are, no matter how buried or distorted the image of God in us may have become. Even in a world so out of kilter, we somehow know that being in right relationship with one another feels and works better than treating others as dispensable commodities.

God is “relationship” personified. God's three-persons-in-one is the pattern for our individual existence. It's who we are. We are all interconnected. And we're better off in every

way when we humbly and gratefully live into our interdependence. God is not only with us, God is part of us. And we are part of one another. Aah. The tears of letting go into God, even if just a little bit. Or at least yearning to let go and let God.

#4 brings us to what some call Gentle Action. Since all God's actions flow from Love, so, we too, are meant to participate in this greatest of all spiritual gifts. Especially in the most trying of times. As St. Paul reminds us, love is gentle, patient, and kind. Love protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. And, get this, Love never fails! Love, in all its many dimensions, is simply the essential, actual, really Real Way of God's world. So when we tap into the gentleness, patience, humility and hope that is Love -- and that is our very essence -- we tap into the most powerful force in the world.

In chaos theory they describe the Butterfly Effect, which says a very small change in one place can cause very significant, unpredictable effects in far distant places within a system. Again, it's how the world works. And just as the butterfly doesn't understand what it's doing, neither do we need to fully comprehend the whole picture. We need just take small, loving actions, which, especially when discerned by God's grace, will likely have life-giving impacts, though we may know nothing about it. And again, we don't even need to have totally pure motives. The manager's actions were a step back into right relationship with others, even if he was hoping to find a roof over his head.

Tears of awe and of relief as I remember again who's in charge. Thank God!

However, **#3** brings more grief and sorrow since following Jesus includes the way of the Cross. Dying to self isn't easy. Even when our self-giving actions in the world are gentle, some people will take offense. And they may respond with anger and even violence. Because that's all they know to rely on.

And so we, following in God's way and in Christ's human footsteps, forgive, which leads to **#2**. The tears of mercy and forgiveness. Such lovely and powerful tears. Lovely because they bring new life and powerful because forgiveness is the bottom line of God's economy. Forgiving material and every other kind of debt. Letting go and being set free. Free to be ourselves just as we are in any given moment, even as we're always changing and growing. What a journey!

#1 on my list of why today's gospel story makes me cry brings me right back here. Tears of gratitude and joy that I get to be me -- as wonderful -- and flawed -- as I am. And that I get to live in this world -- as amazing -- and broken -- as it is. And that part of my world is this faith community -- queer, quirky, and delightfully odd as we are. And that I'm also part of a wider community of wise friends who follow Jesus pretty courageously. And together, all of you help me so much to do my feeble best to live in godliness and dignity as I seek to live into Christ.

Thank you. And thanks be to God.