

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I hate to do this in a sermon, but I think I have to do some sort of backstory and teaching to kick us off. Mostly because this story is really strange. Here goes: Imagine a really successful business. Now imagine that the owner of that business is increasingly absent and giving responsibilities to the store manager. This manager is trusted and competent and has strong relationships with all of the vendors that do business with the store. Now imagine that, one after another, the vendors come in to work with the manager who helps them doctor their invoices so that they end up paying less than they really owe. In this story, the manager is bilking the owner out of money that is owed by being deceitful and maybe even breaking some laws.

Now here is the backstory—in the time of the writing of this Gospel, everyone hearing it would have understood that the absentee owner was probably up to no good. The New Testament talks about the charging of interest as one of the great sins of the ancient near east. So, we have to imagine that these vendors who are coming to the store manager are arriving with grossly inflated bills based on exorbitant interest hikes. And the manager—over and against the wishes of the owner—tells the vendors to adjust their bills to get rid of the exorbitant interest. So, the manager is acting a bit like a Robin Hood in this story and comes off as the hero—even though his actions are probably illegal.

This story is a hard one for the more delicate Christianity that most of us—myself included—tend to practice. This story valorizes the illegal actions of a manager who is operating in an unjust system. Our own Jesus is pointing to the deceitful actions of the manager as something worthy of praise. What are God-fearing and rule-abiding Christians supposed to do with a message like this?

Well, I will invite you to sit in your own discomfort for a few minutes, just as I had to sit in mine. This passage is suggesting that there are times to break the rules.

A friend of mine teaches English in a suburb of Chicago. The seniors one year decided to stage a walkout to protest an increase in police-related deaths in Chicago that year. They wanted to draw attention to a societal evil. My friend gives attendance points every day of class. He is also a sensitive teacher who requires his students to read James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Angela Davis. His students know that he is an ally and accomplice in anti-racist projects. So, imagine their surprise when they all were docked 10 points for their walkout. He explained as best as he could that sometimes doing the right thing—in this case drawing attention to police

brutality—comes with a cost. And that cost, for his seniors, was losing ten points by ditching class. Going against a system—even an unjust one—might very well come with consequences.

I think this is the difficult part about Christians going against a system that is often rigged against the poor and the disenfranchised. In this story, it is one person in a position of power doing something to try to right a wrong that is baked into the system. And, many of us probably have positions where we can act individually to correct some larger wrongs.

But the question that comes up for me this morning is: what can we do as a church to be a little bit subversive—even if there are consequences? What can we do as a church to break a few rules that need breaking, that might get us in a little bit of trouble?

You may have read that the state of Florida shipped some refugees out of Florida and up to Massachusetts. I appreciate that immigration is a complicated geopolitical issue and that at the policy level, smart people have to balance many competing goods. But I also know that people don't flee their homes for trivial reasons. They flee their homes because something is really bad. And now, a group of people has been shipped up to Martha's Vineyard, where they do not know the language or the culture. And where, you might ask, did they end up sleeping? I'm glad you asked. St. Andrew's Episcopal Church opened up its parish hall to the refugees for sleeping and washing, and the church fed every last one of them.

I can tell you from experience that neighbors start to get annoyed when churches start to let poor and homeless people into their buildings. But St. Andrew's did it anyway. Because sometimes you have to break some rules to be able to do what is right.

Another Episcopal church I know buys up medical debt for pennies on the dollar, just like debt collectors do, and then forgives all of it. St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Santa Fe, New Mexico purchased 1.3 million dollars of medical debt for about \$15,000. They sent letters to 782 families informing them that their medical debts were all paid, no strings attached. Why let the debt collectors have all the fun, you know?

So, there are ways for a church to bend some rules and to live out its values. I know that we do not teach the story of the dishonest manager very often in Sunday School because it is an adult story that requires some discernment and life experience to fully grasp. But I wonder if there are some rules out there right now that St. Mark's ought to be thinking about breaking? There probably are.

Sometimes you have to heal on the sabbath. Sometimes you have to forgive debt, even when it is legally owed. Sometimes you have to open up your doors even when some city ordinance tells you that you shouldn't. My friends, Christians have to live in the world, but our obedience is not

to the princes of this earth. Our obedience is always to Christ, and sometimes that obedience compels us to take some bold action, just like the manager in the story. What do you suppose we are being called to today? With God's help, we will find out. Amen.