

Dennis Campbell  
Proper 20 C  
All Saints, Russellville  
18 September 2022

All the biblical commentaries I consulted began the same way when addressing today's Gospel, "This is a very difficult passage for the preacher." From there they each go in any number of directions trying to make sense of why Jesus would be telling a parable like this and how one might be able to salvage something meaningful for a sermon. Whether the parable is useful for any homiletic purpose or not, you can't deny that it's a great story that could easily serve as the basis for a movie.

Apparently, the plantation is owned by a Rich Man, an absentee landlord and he has a manager who's responsible for overseeing the farm and all the tenant farmers on it. Early in the parable the Rich Man finds out that the Manager is squandering the property and he lets

the Manager know that he and a group of auditors are on their way to see how badly the Manager has cooked the books and that in all likelihood he'll be fired.

I suppose the Manager had had it too good for too long and rather than faithfully executing his duties to make sure the farm ran smoothly, he'd resorted to dipping into the till to finance his privileged lifestyle. Sounds like an episode of "American Greed." But of course, the threat of getting caught shook the manager out of his lethargic stupor and the thought of having to actually go to work or maybe starvation set his brain to firing on all eight cylinders. He needed a brilliant plan for survival and he needed it quickly. So he cooked up the idea that he would foster a sense of good will in the tenant farmers by adjusting their debts that they owed in crops to the Rich Man owner. One owed a hundred gallons of olive oil, so

the manager cut it down to 50 gallons instead. Another one who farmed wheat and owed a hundred containers of wheat to the Rich Man got a 20% reduction. As you might imagine the morale of the tenant farmers soared to a new high. This sort of thing had never happened. It was truly a new day on the plantation. There was a new spirit of unbelievable generosity in the air.

My grandfather was a tenant farmer, a sharecropper, and I can remember several times when he took me along to the cotton gin where the plantation store and office were. He'd say, "Son, come on. I got to go talk to "the Man." That usually meant he was going to settle up with the plantation boss who had allowed him the land to farm and fronted him the seed to plant. Often, sometimes during the year Grandpa had to go in and borrow some money for an emergency like fixing the tractor, and now it

was time to settle up. It was time to pay “the Man” the difference between what the plantation had fronted in seed, use of land, loaned cash advances and what my grandfather’s crop of cotton and soybeans had actually produced. Even as a child I could intuitively sense my grandfather’s dismal anxiety about the transaction. At best he would come out of the plantation office with a sense of relief that a dreaded chore was complete, but never a smile or anything that resembled joy. Now, I suspect his experience would have been very different if when he went in to settle up “the Man” had said, “OK, Dan, it looks like the difference that you owe is \$10,000.00 in light of what you produced in cotton and beans, but what say we cut that in half so you’ll have an extra \$5,000.00 to work with.” He would have come out with more than just a smile. He would have danced all the way home with a new sense of

hope, realizing that this would enable them to add the second bedroom and indoor plumbing a few years sooner, and in fact it might even give them enough of a stake to begin buying land of their own.

It is that kind of joy and celebration that the Rich Man owner would have observed when he returned to the farm where his manager had cut deals with all the different tenant farmers. And I suppose it was simply impossible to even consider quenching that enormous spirit of generosity and abundance, because even though from the beginning of the story we expect the Rich Man to lower the boom on the manager, fire him and maybe even try to prosecute or sue him for abusing his authority, instead the Rich Man commends the manager for what he has done. He seems to have had a profound change of heart. The Rich Man would have been well within his rights to extract

justice from the Manager and even the tenant farmers, but he chose a more gracious way. Maybe he saw that in the long run allowing this spirit of generosity and abundance to reign was a better way, a more just and righteous way.

We could use a strong dose of that spirit of generosity and abundance when we consider the stark reality of how many children don't get enough to eat. Arkansas ranks as the second worst state for food insecurity behind New Mexico. Advocates for children say that the younger you are, the more likely you are to live in poverty. I guess I understand why, but something is wrong with that equation.

And of course, I could use a strong dose of that spirit of generosity and abundance when I become so self-righteously consumed with what I think I'm right about instead of trusting God's Holy Spirit to lead us to a faithful

and effective response to these very challenges.

May God open our hearts to God's righteousness and justice so that we can truly welcome God's kingdom of generosity and abundance. AMEN.