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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 18, 2022

Proper 20, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Amos 8:4-7](#)

[Psalm 113](#)

[1 Timothy 2:1-7](#)

[Luke 16:1-13](#)

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At the end of every harvest, the planter would call John Starling up to the big house. John would knock on the back door, the only door he was permitted to enter, according to southern protocol. He and Mr. Reshard met in the planter's kitchen. John Starling was a sharecropper, a tenant farmer for a white boss. It was Florida, sometime in the 1920s.

"Come on in, John," Mr. Reshard said. "Come here, boy. Have a seat." He pulled out his books. "Well, John. Boy, we had a good year, John."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Reshard. I'm sure glad to hear that."

"We broke even. You don't owe me nothing. And I don't owe you nothing."

John had nothing to show for a hard year's toiling in the field. This wasn't unusual. Mr. Reshard was considered a relatively good boss, because he let them break even. Most other sharecroppers ended each year deeper in debt than before,

meaning they were bound to their bosses by debt just as much as their grandparents had been to their masters by slavery.

But of course it was the bosses who did the counting and kept the books. One anthropologist calculated that only a quarter to a third of sharecroppers got an honest settlement, even according to the meager wages that were considered honest. With no vote and protection from law enforcement, a sharecropper had no recourse. But that didn't keep some of them from trying to get what they were due.

The next year, John went back to the big house and got the same news from Reshard. "By God, John, we did it again. We had another good year. We broke even."

"Mr. Reshard," said John, "I'm sure glad to hear that. 'Cause now I can take that extra bale of cotton I hid behind the barn and take it into town and get some money to buy my kids some clothes and some shoes."

The planter jumped up. "Ah, hell, John. Now you see what, now I got to go all over these books again." And somehow, when Reshard checked the books that second time, he discovered that John owed him one more bale of cotton.

John's mother Lena was a sharecropper too. And one year John's brother who had been to school went with her while the planter went over his books with her. When they got through, John's brother spoke up. "Ma, Mr. Reshard's cheating you. He ain't adding them figures right."

The planter jumped up. “Now you see there, Lena, I told you not to send that boy to school! Now he done learn how to count and now he jumped up and called my wife a liar, ’cause it was my wife that figured up these books.” And then and there Reshard’s men came and pistol-whipped John’s brother. But they weren’t finished. That night fifteen or twenty men came looking for him on horseback, for calling a white woman a liar. But John’s parents had known what to expect. John never said where his brother fled to. “They hid him out,” was all that was ever spoken. “He left from out of there.”¹

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Sometimes people have a hard time with the parable we heard Jesus tell today, the parable of the manager who swindles his boss by writing off the debts of the people who owe the boss money. It can be hard to understand why this conniving manager gets to be the hero of the parable so that even the boss praises him in the end.

Now there’s never just one way to read a parable. For me, it helps to read this one and imagine what it was like to live as a tenant farmer in the Roman Empire, maybe as a Jewish farmer working lands that belonged to a Roman or Greek boss in a system that might not have been so totally different from the sharecropping system John Starling lived in a hundred years ago in Florida in that true story taken from Isabel Wilkerson’s book *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

¹ Adapted from Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 53-55.

I imagine Jesus' first hearers hearing this story and responding not with buttoned-up confusion about how a manager who cheated the boss could possibly be the good guy but responding the way anybody responds to a good Robin Hood story about the outlaw with a heart of gold who takes from the rich, gives to the poor, and pulls it off with so much style that even the rich guy he swindles has to grudgingly admire his chutzpah.

I imagine this boss as a kind of Mr. Reshard. A man who thinks of himself as fair and even kindhearted, who didn't create the system he inherited, but lives his life within it without questioning it. He's better than some bosses, which allows him to think of himself as basically a good person, and when he resorts to violence to preserve the hierarchy of things, he does it with a kind of sad shrug, thinking how much it pains him to have to send his men as night terrorists to punish a black man for getting out of his place.

And then this manager does something so bold and shocking that it shakes up the whole system. He writes off debts, which maybe is a good way of saying in a nutshell what God loves to do, which is a line in the Lord's Prayer that we render as "forgive us our trespasses" but literally means "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The manager does a piece of Mr. Reshard's debt forgiving for him without asking, and maybe, just maybe it cracks a little something open in Mr. Reshard. Maybe for the first time he glimpses the reality of his life, built as it is on the exploitation of his fellow children of God. Maybe, like Herod listening with fascination to John the Baptist, maybe he can't find his way to actually changing his life but he can find something to admire in what the manager does. Maybe.

Today we are joining with Esperanza Rosa Mota Moreno who will be washed in the waters of Baptism, and we will renew our own baptismal covenant: a covenant that commits us to seeking and serving Christ in all others, to seeking justice and peace, to respecting the dignity of every human being. Jesus calls us to the way of liberation, the way of freedom. God has forgiven us all our debts. May the renewal of our baptism today commit us again to a radical path of forgiveness for ourselves, for one another, and for all God's children.