

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I must admit that today's parable from Matthew doesn't appear to connect with the Season of Creation. It's not a parable about seeds or a farmer nor is it set among nature. It's mostly a story of forgiveness; however, hearing this story through the social-cultural lens of Jesus's time may give it a deeper meaning. (Now, stick with me here. I know that Bible and history nerds will love this, but I promise that it matters for this story *and* it will connect with our Season of Creation.)

Today's parable is set in the midst of a culture built on honor and shame. In this type of culture, individuals seek to acquire honor and to avoid shame. Both honor and shame are related to the respect ascribed by the opinion of the community. Honor is given when others respected you for observing group expectations. Most of the time, a person's culture, wealth, education, communication skills, family of origin, and political connections determine that level of respect. While shame is when you are scorned for being inadequate.^{1,2} To fully understand an honor-shame culture, we need to step outside of our western, guilt-based culture that uses laws of justice to define

¹ <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/honor-shame-culture-and-gospel/>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r89-QVkkq8_8

morality, and instead, come to understand that shame-based cultures put value in relationships and reputation, because the most valuable asset is reputation.

Ok, so why does this matter? (If you checked out on the anthropological lesson, come join back in or turn up the volume.) Well, throughout the Bible God works to remove shame and restore honor. For example, think back the earth-creatures we call Eve and Adam. These earth-creatures were ashamed but God restored their honor, and even Jesus was shamed when he was executed as a disgraced criminal but so too this shame was transformed into honor in the resurrection. And for today's parable the Rev. Shaun Cozett of South Africa notes that, "We could easily take this parable about money and make money itself the center of our [interpretation], as a reflection of our current society, but in the Biblical context money and forms of exchange were far more about ensuring a positive opinion from the community than about acquiring wealth."³ That is, while our Western, law-based eyes lead us to focus on the forgiveness of the debt, Peter would likely hear this story as one about honor and relationship. The parable reveals that honor comes not from your family or political connections, but instead, true honor comes from how we treat one another. Honor originates within community.

³ <http://sustainable-preaching.org/2020/09/13/15th-sunday-after-pentecost-season-of-creation-2/>

Yet, this communal understanding can be difficult for us to embrace. After all, so much of our Western understanding is built on individuality. We were taught the lie that as long as the individual has a favorable view of themselves, then nothing else matters. And, because our society does not value the collective, then our organizations and corporations don't care about future generations. And, because our societal values are based on money and power, then it becomes okay to rape the land for oil, lumber, and minerals as long as the money flows. And, because Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have become the currency of influence and self-promotion, then it doesn't matter if a gender-reveal causes a deadly wildfire.

However, in today's gospel, we see that God's vision for the world is one that's built around the commons. It's the principle that real honor and respect comes from how we treat one another. And, just imagine if we could live in God's world. It'd be a place where what is shared space becomes the responsibility of all. It'd be a world where we recognize that the survival of the collective depends on all of us. A place where pollution in Wicker Park and Lincoln Park becomes just as abhorrent as environmental destruction in Austin or South Lawndale. It's a world where, although the problem might not literally be in my backyard, any problem impacting all of creation is my backyard. It's a vision that God has been revealing to us from the very beginning—from that first moment when humankind was formed from the dust of the ground and given the task to care for all of creation—an understanding that we are so

deeply interconnected with one another on a global scale that we must care for commons like it is all of ours, because gosh darn it, we do share all of it. And, if there is one thing this stupid virus has shown us is that what Jesus said in today's parable is so darn true—that is: the thing that brings honor and respect is how we care for one another.

And, that's the beauty of what happens at the font. For, like Brynlee, each of us have been welcomed into a global family. We take seriously our responsibility to Brynlee and all of creation. We gather to stand up to ecological injustice, and we promote the Biblical and God-given right that all people regardless of race, county of origin, or dividing characteristic are entitled to care for and share in all of creation. For, we are washed at the font with living water that reminds us of God's love. A love that is also fed to us in bread and given for us in wine. A love in which we see our God abundantly give mercy and grace, so that we too, can be merciful and gracious in preserving God's gift for all creation.

So, sure, today's parable about a king, slaves, and debts may not seem like a story about creation, but deep down, the story of creation has always been a communal story. It's a story of God's vision for a self-giving community. It's God's story where the divisions seen in terms like "you" and "me" are replaced by the communal "us." It's the story of God's gift of salvation—given for you, for me, and for all. Amen.