

Proper 20C Pentecost
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Trinity Episcopal Church
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“Bizarro” World
 Luke 16: 1 -13

Some of you may remember the idea of “Bizarro World,” first from the Superman comics, then later in TV shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *Seinfeld*. Now it’s part of popular culture. When I act really strange and out of character, Cherise will always say, “Is that Bizarro Paul?” In “Bizarro World,” everything is exactly opposite from what you would expect. For example, a salesman is doing a brisk trade in stocks and bonds which he touts as “guaranteed to lose you money.” Or a police detective is selected to investigate a major scandal because he’s clearly the “most incompetent officer on the force.”

Today’s gospel reminds me of “Bizarro World.” An incompetent and dishonest manager squanders his master’s money and gets fired. In order to curry favor with those who owe his master money, without the master knowing, he goes out and forgives part of their debts. And his punishment? The master commends him because he is so shrewd! We often think the master in these parables represents God, right? So what’s going on?

As I am sure you can imagine, a lot of scholarship on the Bible is pretty dry stuff, but I was amused to look up some of the commentaries and see how exercised these scholars got over this passage. One scholar called it “incomprehensible.” Another doubted whether even Luke himself understood what Jesus was saying.

To understand today’s gospel, it’s helpful to realize that it comes right after the famous parable of the Prodigal Son, the story of two brothers, each lost in his own way, and the wonderfully compassionate father who guides each one home. Remember the story of the young son who demands his inheritance, goes out and squanders it and ends up taking care of pigs and having to eat their food? He returns to his father expecting scorn and punishment, but his father throws him a party, while his older brother, the one who’s done the right thing all his life, sulks.

On first glance these two stories seem exactly opposite, don’t they? But there are striking similarities. In both cases, the young men are in desperate straights and have nothing to show for themselves but a wasted and misspent life. They both betray a trust – one to a master and one to his father. Neither offers an excuse or an apology – they screwed up, period. Both the son and the manager experience amazing grace. They are not banned from the family or sent to jail. The son gets an extravagant party from his father, and the manager a surprising commendation from his boss.

This gospel reminds me of an incident when I was first ordained and was making my way to the local inner city hospital to visit a parishioner. I drove round and round trying to find a parking space, and when I finally did, I jumped out of the car, thanked God, and

rushed in to see the patient. It was only when I returned an hour later that I realized I had locked my keys in the car. Just then a young African American boy, maybe ten years old, approached me. "Something wrong, mister?" he asked. "Yup," I said with great embarrassment, "I locked my keys in the car." He said, "I can help you," took a piece of coat wire out of his pocket, and had the door open in 30 seconds.

I said, "I'm so glad I ran into you," to which he replied, "Is it worth a dollar to you?" "A dollar?" I said, "Here's five!"

As I think of that boy, I wonder how different he is from the manager in our gospel. At ten, he was already a pro at breaking into cars, and using his skills to survive in that bare-bones environment. He did the right thing by me, and he also served his own self – interest. The master in our gospel might very well have commended him as well, and called him shrewd.

So maybe this is the way to look at it. The manager is a real estate agent who collects rent from farmers in kind – through oil or wheat. When he's found to have embezzled some funds or just spent them unwisely – we don't know which – he doesn't argue or protest his innocence. His silence admits his guilt. But in that silence, he realizes something astounding – he's fired but not punished. In fact, he's not even scolded. This is simply a natural consequence of his screw – up. His master expects obedience and is not afraid to exercise judgment, to let the young man suffer the consequences of his behavior, BUT his master also shows unusual mercy and generosity, even to a dishonest steward.

So the manager makes a plan that relies entirely on his master's mercy. If he fails, he'll go to prison. If he succeeds he'll be a community hero. Like the ten year – old with the coat wire, he acts in his own interest, but also in ways that help everyone else involved. By doing so, he enters into a world of grace, a kind of "Bizarro World" where the rules are not quite the same as what we're used to.

In this world, the farmers get some of their debt forgiven. Since they don't know the manager has been fired, they think this is due to the generosity of the master. So they applaud the manager, and praise the master's generosity. He's now seen as a man of great kindness. And the manager? He's now ready to start being a success in his community, rather than a failure. Pretty bizarre, huh?

Remember, the master, of course, has two choices here. He can expose this fraud, which will clearly make the farmers angry at him and the manager, or he can accept the accolades of the farmers and quietly praise the shrewdness of the manager. He chooses the win – win option.

So what does this have to do with us twenty centuries later? The truth is that all of the choices we make in life also have mixed motives – after all, we're human and not God. When we give someone a present out of what we think is the kindness of our heart, we feel great about ourselves and them.

But when they don't say "Thank you," we get resentful, because we partly did it to look great and generous. When we cook a birthday meal for a partner who gets stuck at work, and it's cold and inedible by the time she arrives, instead of feeling compassion for such a hard worker, we regret we even bothered. When a parent misunderstands and scolds us for something we didn't do, forgiveness comes hard. When we think we are at our best, it's tough to see how human we can be at the same time.

I suggest we be a little easier on our selves. Most of what we do involves some measure of self – interest. The trick is to make sure, like my ten year – old friend with the coat hanger, and like the shrewd manager, that everyone effected by our choices leaves better off than before; to make sure that everyone wins. It's not perfect, but then neither are we. We can think of it as a minimum standard for ourselves. Like the oath that doctors take, "At least, do no harm."

And that's where the miracle of God's grace comes in. We do the best we can. And God looks on it and says, "It is good." You see, God loves us exactly as we are, and too much to let us stay there. God is grateful for our effort. And in return, God sends an abundance of grace so that, next time, we'll do better. And the amazing thing is that the more we focus on at least looking at the impact of our behavior on everyone it affects, the more aware we become of everyone around us, the more compassionate we become, and the more generous our heart grows. So that in the end, we can answer with a little less embarrassment the real question that should guide every one of our choices, "What would Jesus do?"