

This sermon was given on September 18th, 2022 at All Saints' Church Princeton, NJ by the Rev. Joan Fleming. This is a transcribed copy of the original audio.

This is not going to be a formal sermon, nor indeed is it going to be a very conventional one. In fact, the Gospel itself is disturbingly unconventional. Did you listen carefully? Could you make head or tail? I can't.

I'm gonna give it a good tribal, but who ever heard of a boss who praised his employee for cheating on him?

This parable has been a head scratcher. From the very earliest times as we can actually tell from the text in Luke 16.

It's pretty clear that the gospel writer has tried to soften the impact of this perplexing story by inserting several quite, conventional maxims after recounting the parable itself

Whoever is faithful, in a very little is faithful also in much, no problem with that, but does it fit the parable?

No slave can serve two masters for slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. Again, impeccable reasoning, but does it fit the parable?

You cannot serve God and wealth or mammon if you prefer the King James Version. These maxims simply do not fit the context. They seem somehow tacked on.

The parable of the rich fool in Luke chapter 12, for example, built himself if you remember this one, he built himself bigger barns when he had a bumper crop of wheat.

He was so pleased with it and he was going to save it all up for himself. And God says, you fool. Today your life is demanded of you and he dies that night.

That would seem to be a more appropriate context. For the maxim, you cannot serve God and wealth.

I don't know if you remember several years ago, a group of biblical scholars came together to form what was called the Jesus Seminar. Does that ring a bell?

These scholars included such heavy hitters as J. Dominic Crossan and I think Marcus Borg. The aim of the book that they produced which was titled *The Five Gospels* was to identify the authentic words of Jesus. The book lays out the text of the four gospels plus one other the non canonical Gospel of Thomas it lays out the text with the words of Jesus that gained a unanimous vote from the scholars; printed in red, so you can tell it on your pages. Oh, these are the words that Jesus read more dubious words, were printed in mauve and those which none of the scholars ascribed to Jesus, in black.

So I turned to this book, fully expecting to find that the parable of the unjust steward would be given at most a dubious ranking and be printed in mauve.

But oh dear, what was my shock and disappointment to find that on the contrary, the parable itself was printed in red, indicating that the scholars were unanimous that this strange parable had been told by Jesus Himself. But the moralizing maxims were printed in black.

I was left wondering, What in the world did Jesus have in mind when he told such a story? Did he tell it with his tongue in his cheek? Was he teasing the disciples? Was he demonstrating a sense of humor?

You see my frustration is parable.

I'm not going to speculate any further. I leave it to you to argue about. I say no more.

I told you this was going to be an unconventional sermon. And to prove it I will not move in a complete non-sequitur without apology to reflection on our Epistle reading from Timothy.

I wonder if many of you when you heard this reading, had a thought of the late Queen Elizabeth.

For she would no doubt have approved, appreciated Paul's admonition that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all in high positions. That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

I think Elizabeth has been much on our minds in these days following her death. She has in mind certainly for she of all people, actually did embody that quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity that St. Paul speaks on.

Indeed, she had pledged herself to such a life on her 21st birthday. When she famously said, "I declare before you all my whole life, whether it be long or short, will be dedicated to your service."

Have you all heard that quote, many a time, she was just 21 and the throne was to be hers.

And she fulfilled that promise.

It can't have been easy.

However, I am sure that she was truly upheld by the prayers of her people. And that she counted on them.

Reflecting on Paul's admonition that we pray for those in authority. Our own prayer book includes prayers for our president, the leaders of the nations and all in authority.

While the English Book of Common Prayer includes prayers, specifically for the sovereign, Eternal God, fount and source of all authority and wisdom, here on prayer for those who govern, give to Elizabeth Queen grace as the symbol of loyalty and unity for all our different peoples.

Today's world is in such turmoil, conflict and violence, that St. Paul's admonition continues to be solely needed.

But do we believe that such prayers can truly make a difference in our world?

I believe that they can, both for the one who prays. And for those who are prayed for. I think Elizabeth herself must have felt the support and love of thousands who did pray for her throughout her long reign, and prayer, any prayer, affect those who pray as well as those for whom we pray? We ask for forgiveness for ourselves and find that we are more disposed to forgive others.

We pray that those in need, they find support and when we find ourselves moved, to give them the support they need.

It's all a mystery. God moves in a mysterious way. His wonders to perform.

And prayer too, moves in a mysterious way to enable us to act in response to God's love, mercy and truth.

What does the Lord require but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?

In the name of that God, Amen.