
I'd Rather Be in Relationship Than Be Right

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Proper 20 – Year C

I'd rather be in relationship than be right.

These were my father's words. He was an Episcopal priest and his voice was that of authority. I imagine that the Gettysburg Address must have been delivered in Dad's voice. He always seemed to be like Abraham Lincoln, a big marble figure proclaiming the truth.

But this one I never got. I'd rather be in relationship than be right.

For, you see, Dad was an Episcopal priest at a difficult time. Over his tenure, he introduced a new prayer book. This was 1979, though some people still refer to it as the *new* prayer book. It was a difficult time to change the way people worshipped.

There was a wonderful story of Dad noticing that a woman, we'll call her Mrs. Smith, seated in the back of the worship space, continued to use the old prayer book. Dad dutifully went over to her and suggested that he would be happy to get her one with larger print, or work with her on understanding the new service, or in any other way accommodate whatever it was that was troubling her.

She looked up at him and she said, "Young man, I was here before you got here. I'll be here after you leave. And I'm not gonna let you screw up my service."

Yet, to look at Dad's career is to see again and again and again entering into conflict, standing up for what is right, leading change with all of the consequences that that entails, integrating the church, ordaining women.

Dad was rector of Christ Church in Savannah, Georgia for years and to read the history of the parish is to see this. Reverend Maxwell, they said, made many changes. And then they began to detail them. Finally, two paragraphs in, the historian said, "Finally, he stopped and it was time. We had changed enough."

I never understood "I'd rather be in relationship than to be right," because if you weren't right I don't know what difference relationship made. I'm happy to be in relationship, don't get me wrong, just as soon as you acknowledge that I'm right.

And I think this gives us a key for understanding our gospel today: the parable from Luke, which is known by some as "the parable about the unjust steward" because to read this parable is to wade into the weeds where it's hard to figure out where you are, or to see what to do, or to determine what is right.

All of the efforts to look at this story, in my humble opinion, fall short.

We look with great education and knowledge and experience at that story trying to determine what is right. But it won't let us. We want to call the steward unjust.

Now to understand what a steward is I want you to think of Mr. Carson on Downton Abbey, that servant who is managing

the estate, responsible for so much of what happens, distributing the money, taking care of the day-to-day operations. That's who the steward is – a manager.

So we think, “Well he's stolen from his master,” but the story doesn't say that. It said he squandered the possessions but maybe he was just incompetent. And then the story says that the master approved of this scheme, forgiving debts – the debts of the master, after all.

What do you owe the master? 100. Mark it to 50.

What do you owe the master? 100. Mark it 80.

But there's no indication that the master lost anything. Maybe that was his cut. Maybe it was a fraudulent interest that the master could not even admit to having charged. We don't know. We don't even know who thought he did the right thing. Was it the master or was it Jesus?

The deeper we probe into this story trying to figure out what is right, the more frustrated we become. Is it about being clever? Is it about stopping fraudulent behavior? Is it about restoring the honor of the master who, after all, was dishonored because of the squandering of his property? We don't really know

And what about all of those morals at the end? It's hard to make sense of all of those too. But I think Dad's words, “I'd rather be in relationship than be right,” help right here.

Because I don't think the story is about right behavior, except to the extent that it's about relationship.

Because what really happens to the steward is that his life falls apart – his status, his security, his very survival is threatened. And he reaches out. He reaches out to his community. He reaches out for relationship.

We don't know if he was right or not. We only know that when it got tough, he turned to others. He found relationship. And in doing so, brought the community together.

This is the one interpretive key that begins to make sense of all of the other interpretations. Is it about forgiveness? Maybe. Is it about honor/shame? Maybe. Is it about a Hellenistic reciprocity? Maybe.

But what it is about is relationship. What it is about is a community being torn apart by certain practices that is brought back together.

I'd rather be in relationship than be right.

I want to suggest to you that this might be the parable of the prudent steward – not the unjust steward but the prudent steward, because it is prudent action which is validated and approved and cited by Jesus. Clever action that is prudent because it builds relationship, forms the community, brings people together.

Many of you know that my father died unexpectedly only two weeks ago. And so the experience of being with him as he died and at his funeral is very vivid, very alive for me. And I had in my head all that Dad stood for, all of those things that he had done right: the prayer book. Integration. Women's ordination.

I laughed at the memories of my own ordination, Dad looking at me in 2004 and saying, “I did the prayer book. I did race. I did gender. This whole gay and lesbian thing? It's yours.”

And then the church where he had been found itself in seven years of litigation and Dad was dragged right back in it. There he was again fighting for what was right with integrity and force and voice.

Yet but I heard in the words that people offered about Dad was not about great deeds done in the past, not about rights triumphing over wrongs, not about all of the battles that Dad had fought. It was insight that he gave me yesterday.

“Your father,” a priest told me, “said to me, ‘You must accept the way they are. You cannot change them.’ It made all the difference to my ministry.”

One preacher told a story about Dad simply helping her through the liturgy when her anxiety rendered her incapable of proceeding.

They were small things that happened yesterday and last week and last month and they were all, every single one, about relationship.

Dad did not shrink from a fight. He had his own sense of what was right, and he was going to tell you. But somehow it wasn't more important than relationship. Somehow he could tell you what he thought and you never thought he was leaving you or distancing himself from you or putting you at bay. Somehow he always heard and saw.

Even in those seven years of bitter litigation, there was a way that Dad saw the good in others, refused to allow that conflict to change his approach.

Those words rang true over and over again: I'd rather be in relationship than be right.

After we put my father's ashes into the ground and a storm was coming through Savannah, Georgia, it was time for me to come back. My time had been made tolerable and even possible because of the time I'd spent with my family, because of my friends and colleagues who had come down to be with me, because of the letters that I received from all of you, because of relationship and the knowledge that I was not there alone. Disoriented. Sad. But not alone.

I stayed in Savannah until the storm had passed through to ensure that mother would not be isolated and I drove back up 16. And as I looked at the sky, painted by the storm, I was mesmerized by its beauty, pulled into it in a way, as the sun set and everything seemed real.

It was as if Dad was the sky and sky was Dad. Not because I thought it was going to be alright. It didn't comfort me in the sense of taking away the pain. And I heard these words: I'd rather be in relationship than be right

And I knew then that that was Dad. His message to us all, that real life is in community. Real life is in community.

That's why the steward is prudent, I think, because when it didn't work, he reached out to his community and that's how I survived that week when I was disoriented and isolated. It was community.

"I'd rather be in relationship than be right," Dad used to say, because I think he knew that absent relationship you can never be right. Absent relationship you can never be right.

I'd rather be in relationship than be right.

Amen.