I am such a Gospel girl. I really thought I was going to take on Jeremiah this week, delving into his great lament, and I also gave serious consideration to talking about the exhortation in the letter to Timothy to pray for everyone. But besides echoing the encouragement that all people deserve our prayers, and that God wills for all to be saved and know the truth, I wasn’t sure what else to say. That would have made a very short sermon!

Besides, in addition to loving the Gospel so much – how could I not talk about this parable of the dishonest steward or shrewd manager? [I have to digress a moment and say that the first time I preached on this parable, I was on prednisone for a knee injury. Steroids are not my friend. My conclusion that day was that Jesus must have been on steroids to tell this parable. Because really, what other explanation could there be?]

Fortunately, I’m not on prednisone this week, and I’ve studied this crazy parable for a few more years. Parables don’t always yield their pearls of wisdom easily. Even the ones that seem straightforward have a twist. Jesus used them to turn things upside down, to put a new spin on how to think about something, to shock and surprise and shake things up. We must resist the temptation to tame parables or explain them and make them into moral stories with a clear message for how to better ourselves or be nicer people. Jesus wasn’t teaching us to be nice. He was teaching us about the differences between our ways and God’s ways.
This parable is no exception, and it’s not easily tamed. It’s a story that scholars completely disagree about. I’m not going to explore all the possibilities today. This parable and the sayings following it raise more questions than they answer, and I could riff on differing interpretations far longer than you’d want to listen. Instead, I want to focus on an interpretation based on a Social-Science Commentary that looks at the scripture through the history of the social systems of the ancient Mediterranean world. Let’s dive in.

There was a rich man who had a manager. Charges are brought against the manager that he is *squandering* his master’s property – note that squandering is the same word used of the prodigal son when he squanders his inheritance. Apparently, the charges seemed real enough that the rich man fires him and demands an accounting of his management. When faced with the loss of his job, the manager realistically assesses his options, noting he’s not strong enough for manual labor and he’s not willing to beg, so he hatches a plan to take care of himself.

He meets with those who owe his master, erases some of their debt, and puts himself in their good favor. The debtors get a good deal by owing less to the rich man, and the manager hopes that in return they will take him in once they know he has been fired from his job.

Here comes the unexpected turn. When the rich man finds out what his manager has done, he commends the manager because he acted shrewdly. Huh. The rich man will be getting less than what he’s owed, but he commends the manager? That just doesn’t make sense. At least not to us. Not today.
But in that time, the master has already treated the manager better than expected. Instead of firing him, he could have inflicted a much harsher penalty. The law said that a steward of an estate could be expected to “pay for any loss incurred by his employer for which he was responsible.”¹ He could even be put in prison and his family made to pay. Simply firing the steward was a pretty merciful choice for the rich man. So, the manager quickly runs back to the people of the village and engages in his debt reduction scheme before anyone knows he’s been relieved of his position. His strategy is to get new patrons since his old one has relieved him of duty and he’s also banking on the master continuing to choose mercy.

His strategy more than succeeds. Not only has he increased his social capital with the debtors, but he has also put his master in a tricky position. If the rich man criticizes his steward and insists the debts be paid in full, then he will risk a severe loss of status with his debtors who are, no doubt, praising him for his generosity. If he accepts what the manager has done, then he will be even more greatly praised along with the manager who has brokered the arrangement. He commends the manager. Both the shrewd master and the shrewd manager benefit – and those who benefit most of all are the ones who no longer have so much debt.

Taken this way, the parable doesn’t seem so inconsistent with Jesus’ teachings. I can’t help but wonder if there are some parallels to be drawn between the mercy and generosity of the master and the mercy and generosity of God. The master could have been much more severe with the manager – and he would have been in the right. There’s nothing “fair” about what happened to his wealth. But instead, he was merciful.

He forgave the manager like the father forgave the prodigal son, even though the manager wasn’t at all repentant and continued in his dishonesty. Could God’s grace be like that? Forgiving and generous, even when we continue to do the wrong thing?

And yet, what the manager did was kind of Robin Hood like. His strategy, though intended for his own benefit, actually benefitted those who in that time could ill afford to pay as much as they owed. He was using his cleverness to do good for others albeit at a financial cost to his master. At the same time his plot increased the master’s honor. And in an honor/shame society like that in which Jesus lived, increased honor was its own form of currency. In addition, instead of continuing to squander his master’s wealth, the steward used that wealth to strengthen relationships and to make things better for everyone, as long as you don’t define “better” in terms of the rich man becoming richer.

Could Jesus be suggesting we use what may seem like questionable skills for the good? I don’t mean doing a little shoplifting for the Lord, but how might we use some of our gifts like street smarts, creative survival, or political savvy in the service of the Gospel? How can we use our resources shrewdly for building up the kingdom of God?

From a different angle, perhaps Jesus is challenging us to consider where in our lives we might decide to overlook some wrong that’s been done to us or respond to an unfair situation with grace and mercy.

Or, if we find ourselves in the position of the debtors, Jesus may even be saying something to us about debts being forgiven. Imagine if your car payment or
mortgage or some other large debt was suddenly reduced by a third or half. I’m guessing there would be much rejoicing.

As I said at the beginning, this parable offers more questions than answers, and that seems about par for the course with Jesus. He told these parables to offer a different perspective, to shake things up, to surprise his listeners.

So my question for you today is:
What are you hearing in this story? How might God be surprising you?