



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

15th Sunday after Pentecost: September 22, 2019

Sermon Title: "The Unjust Manager of Love"

Gospel Text: Luke 16:1-13

April 11, 1982 began as the most ordinary of days for Angela Cavallo, a most ordinary woman. Angela, in her mid 50's, was a mother and a grandmother – someone you'd be pleased to have as a neighbor but also someone who probably wouldn't stand out to you as anyone particularly exceptional or noteworthy. On that April day, Angela's son Tony was in the driveway, working away on his 1964 Chevy Impala. That too wasn't anything out of the ordinary – he loved that car and was always tinkering with it.

But the normalcy of that spring day quickly exploded into chaos when the jacks under the car gave way and it collapsed on top of Tony. As the automobile pressed down on Tony, squeezing the very life out of him, Angela sprang from her house with a bolt of adrenaline. It didn't appear she had any options to save her son. After all, she was no bodybuilder or athlete. *But a mother's love has a power all its own.* And so, with a superhuman burst of strength, Angela lifted that nearly 3,500-pound vehicle off Tony. With one of her feet she nudged him to crawl out, but he couldn't. And so still holding that car aloft, she called for an 11-year-old neighbor boy to find help. He tracked down two others, who came running down the street. They repositioned the jacks so Angela could finally release her iron grip on the car and Tony could be dragged to safety. Angela Cavallo is a prime example of the power of love – a power that will do *anything* to save a dear one in mortal danger.<sup>1</sup>

Few of us *have ever* or *will ever* be in the horrifying circumstances Angela experienced that day in 1982, but all of us know what it is to love someone so fiercely and completely that you will do *anything* to protect and preserve that person. I experienced that miracle of love in the adoption of my two children. In both cases, the first time I held them – the first time their skin touched mine – I bonded to them as a father in every sense of the word – and from that moment on, I would have faced any danger and assumed any risk to keep them safe. That's what love does. *You know that.* Friends, if we flawed and imperfect people are capable of such sacrificial love, just imagine what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will do to protect, preserve, bless, and save us.

That brings us to today's Gospel lesson. I would wager that this parable – widely known as the "parable of the unjust manager" - is among the *least* favorite parables in the entire New Testament. After wrestling with it this week, I see why it's so unpopular. It's perplexing, largely because it seems as if Jesus is praising a manager who is at worst a *thief* and at best *horribly unethical*.

Theologians through the last 2,000 years have struggled mightily to make sense of this parable, and there seems to be as many interpretations of it as leaves on a tree. For example, some argue that the unjust manager stands for the proposition that the Church shouldn't be afraid to apply the ways of the world – even those that are a little unsavory – if it advances Christ's kingdom. Others argue that the manager isn't really a crook because the discounts he is giving the customers are really his bloated commissions, and so he's in fact demonstrating repentance by his actions. Still another historic interpretation of this parable is that Jesus is *condemning* rather than *commending* the manager, because the eternal home Jesus promises people like the manager isn't a *heavenly* habitation but a cold, lonely sinner's grave.

But as I read and re-read this parable all week, the vision that came to me was *love* – a love that will do anything to save another – the kind of love that enables a middle-aged mother to lift an automobile from her son's body. You see, I think it matters that Luke placed *this* story in *this* particular place within his Gospel. It follows three astonishing stories of grace: the parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin that Pastor Hetrick so eloquently shared with us last Sunday, and my favorite parable in the Bible – the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus uses those three stories to teach the astonishing Good News that despite our brokenness, we are loved so fully, so perfectly, and so completely by God that God will stop at nothing to find us, draw us in, and transform us by his love so that we in turn can be his ambassadors of love and transformation for our broken world. These are stories that preach the most fundamental and important article of our faith: we are saved out of God's inexhaustible love and grace.

Our world resists this amazing truth because it seems too easy, too unjust, like a massive loophole for sinners. We want to make others sweat and work for their salvation because it makes us feel better about ourselves. We're not all that different from the tax collectors, sinners, and Pharisees who were listening to Jesus as he told these stories, one after the other. In a sense, he was telling the same story over-and-over, just with different characters, hoping that one of those scenarios might penetrate their thick skulls and thicker hearts. In my view, the parable of the unjust manager is a *fourth* try to get them to understand the scandalous miracle of God's love and grace, this time using the backdrop of commerce – a context this particular audience knew very well.

And so for me, the so-called unjust manager is Jesus himself, doing whatever it takes to save his people. After all, isn't that what we pray for all the time? "Forgive us our trespasses... our sins... our *debts*." This parable is about *mercy* and *forgiveness* that we may not *deserve* but desperately *need*. And this parable is about *salvation* and *grace* as a *gift* of Jesus Christ. But isn't the manager breaking the law? Well, as no less an authority than Martin Luther himself once preached, "Love should be the interpretation of all laws."<sup>1</sup> This parable is overflowing with Christ's love for sinners... for the imperfect... for the broken... for *us*.

But, you say to yourself, "Wait pastor! Are you really suggesting that Jesus could be anything like an unjust manager? How can you possibly compare Jesus to a questionable character like that?" Well, I'll remind you that Jesus tended to associate with a lot of sketchy people – the kind of people "respectable society" tends to avoid. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus compared himself to a "thief in the night," and as someone who would tie up the strong man and plunder his house. And we all know that his victory over sin and death came about because he

allowed himself to be convicted and executed like a *common criminal*, in the presence of two other *common criminals*, in part because the people chose to give freedom to a *real criminal* – Barabbas – instead of Jesus. It's no insult to compare Jesus to the manager in this parable, because the Savior I know and follow would pay any *price* and break any *rule* out of his love for his people – even worthless old me and worthless old you.

On that April day in 1982, it was a miracle what Angela Cavallo did in lifting that massive car off her son's body. He was transported to the hospital and in just a few days was released with no lasting injuries. *She saved his life through the power of love.* On the cross, Jesus worked an even bigger miracle by lifting the massive burden of sin from us. *He has saved our lives and our eternities through the power of his love.* Please don't take that for granted. You are loved more than you can ever imagine – no exceptions. It's nearly *inconceivable*. And yet it's *true*.

How do we possibly respond to a love that profound? With gratitude. With joy. And by loving Jesus back by loving those he loved. Don't ever underestimate the power of *his* love – or *yours*. Amen.

#### Citations

<sup>1</sup> See <https://blog.genealogybank.com/angela-cavallo-saves-her-sons-life-with-her-supermom-strength.html> for a photo of the Carvallo family and a newspaper account of the incident.

<sup>2</sup> LW 79:155