

Good morning please be seated.

A couple of weeks ago I had a slow leak in my condominium coming from a common pipe that went from the third story down to my first-floor condo. I reached out to our property manager to schedule the emergency plumber. I received a reply message that she was out of the office that day. So then I called the main number and reached someone who wasn't helpful at all and transferred me somewhere else and on and on through 6 or 7 people who offered no help but only transferred me to people some of whom didn't answer or even in one case hung up on me. By now I was pretty frustrated verging on really annoyed. Then the situation changed. I sent an e-mail to our board president asking for her help and she wrote me back with the direct number of our property manager's assistant. I called and emailed her and soon she called me back and had the emergency plumber coming in the afternoon. Diane who is the property manager called me on her day off while she was sitting in the waiting room of her doctor for an appointment to ask me about the leak so she could make sure that the people in her office who were working stayed on top of it.

My earlier interactions had been so frustrating because they were purely transactional in nature - trying to find someone who could schedule the emergency plumber to come out and stop the leak but not getting anyone who was able to do that or even willing to do more than just transfer me to the next person. The whole process felt was isolating, annoying, distinctly unwelcoming, and unneighborly. Whereas my interactions with Diane and our board president were grounded in relationship and therefore led to resolution.

In the parable in today's gospel, which can be challenging to understand, we have the rich man who holds the debts of several people, the people who are indebted to the rich man, and the rich man's manager who is responsible for collecting the payments on the debts. I am going to focus our attention this morning on the manager. Before we dive into the parable it is important to have a little bit of context about the situation Jesus is describing. At the time of Jesus, although the Bible forbid collecting interest on debts, in reality the practice was to include what we would call hidden fees that really were interest on the loan itself which made it nearly impossible to ever pay back the full debt. People like the rich man in the parable used the practice to take advantage illiterate, poor people who wound up with debts that could never be paid back.

In this context we encounter the manager. Luke tells us that he was squandering the property of the rich man. And so the rich man is going to fire him because he no longer has any use for the manager. Immediately the manager was in a panic. His identity and position in society was based on his role as the rich man's business manager. He has no skills for other work and no desire to take up unskilled manual labor and he is too proud to beg.

Without his position he has left himself alone and isolated in the world. He devises a scheme to win the favor of the rich man's debtors by reducing their debt. Likely he did

not actually reduce the original debt. But simply removed some portion of the hidden fees that had been tacked onto the loans perhaps including his own commission, all of which were against Jewish law. The rich man is pleased, we can assume, because now he thinks he might get paid. The manager is pleased because he has done something which he thinks will benefit him. And those in debt, remain in debt, less debt, but an onerous burden, nonetheless.

The manager's interactions with everybody in the story are only transactional. He has a contract with the rich man to be his manager and to collect the rich man debts. This contract allows him to earn money and gives him a position of power but does not give him a relationship with the rich man or the debtors.

When he breaches the contract, he is fired. The rich man has no personal concern for what becomes of the manager. The manager's interactions with the debtors also are simply transactional. He had not developed any sort of personal relationship with any of them. He saw them only as a means of keeping his position and lining his pockets at their expense. He doesn't lower their debt out of generosity or mercy or love. He lowers their debt hoping to gain something for himself, in this case welcome into a community he had wanted to be no part of until the moment when he no longer has his status position as a rich man's manager.

Jesus is not holding up the rich man or the manager as people to be emulated. Jesus tells us that who you are in this life and how you treat others matters. All the manager has been transactional interactions with other people. He has no relationships with others, no love for his neighbor, and likely has no relationship with God.

Let's compare the parable to our relationship with God. God holds our debts or sins or trespasses. Like the debts in the parable our debts are greater than we could ever repay. Each time we pray the Lord's prayer we ask God to forgive us our debts as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. The rich man only wants to collect on the debt because he has no relationship with those who owe him a debt. But God has a relationship with each and every one of us that is built on the foundation of God love for us. He does not ask us to pay for our debts to him. Instead he paid our debt for us through the grace of God and the sacrifice his only son.

And the one who paid our debt for us, our Lord Jesus Christ, calls us to love God with all our heart with all our soul and with all our mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. This call is a call to relationship with each other and with every person who we encounter and even with those whom we may never meet.

In our country we have seen over a period of many years the erosion of relationship and the growth of transactional interactions. We are bombarded constantly by rude drivers on the road, nasty comments on Internet postings, derogatory name calling over political opinion, the dehumanizing of people who are different than ourselves. All of this separation and degradation of relationship has only been exacerbated by

the last 2 1/2 years of the pandemic. The pandemic forced us into isolation from each other and exacerbated our differences rather than drawing us together. How far we have strayed from the commandment to love each other.

Does everybody remember back in the springtime when we did our Christ Church survey? We had over 60 of us respond to the survey. The results of three of the questions show that we all have keenly been feeling the lack of relationship during the pandemic.

We asked what has been challenging for you at Christ Church? The top answer was the pandemic including how it had separated us from each other and the 3rd highest answer was getting to know people and make connections.

The top answer to the question of what has been enriching to you at Christ Church was fellowship/relationships/friendships and to the question about what could help us grow deeper in faith the 2nd highest answer was fellowship and relationship. My brothers and sisters we are yearning to be in a relationship with each other, to love each other.

That love we yearn for is the foundation of everything that Jesus calls us to do and to be. Love is what calls us into relationship with God and love is what calls us into relationship with each other. When we are open to the love of God we are transformed from transactional beings into people who love our neighbors as ourselves and seek to be in relationship with each other. When love and relationship become the center of how we interact with the world then we live God's commandment for us to love and we live fully into our baptismal vows.

I would like to challenge each of us today and in the coming week to build a new relationship or reconnect with a relationship that may have fallen away during the pandemic. Just as communion nourishes us each week so that we can go out into the world to do the work that God has called us to do, strengthening our relationships will nourish us so we can carry the message of God's love out into our world. I have said this before, the world needs the love of God as much as it ever has. And we the followers of Jesus, who have been transformed by his love and forgiveness of our debts, we can go out into our world and transform it as the living embodiment of the Good News in relationships build on the foundation of the love of God. AMEN