

The Rascal

Sometimes you wonder if Jesus tells a particular story just to see if we're listening. "Yeah, yeah, Jesus, blah, blah, thank you very much."

"What?!"

Today's gospel is one of those.

The story of the unjust steward is so obnoxious, so offensive, so just plain weird to our ears because it not only ignores our rules about owning things, about private property, about "our rights", it doesn't just ignore those rules, it laughs at them.

Our rules of ownership, of private property, of "mine", are as much a part of me as my skin and bones. We each of us have our own things: houses or apartments, clothes, toys, jewelry; all stuff that is "mine". And while from time to time, out of the kindness of my heart, I might share what is mine with you, I never forget, in my heart of hearts, that what is being shared is mine.

On these rules of mine and yours we have built our society. We have built our society as well on rules that flow from the rule of mine and yours. Rules like, "Don't cheat the boss" and "Be a loyal worker". These rules bind us together; they define who we are.

In the face of these rules, Jesus tells his story. A crooked employee is caught with his hand in the boss's till. That's bad enough. But then the rascal goes out and shafts the boss again!

The olive oil that one fellow got but didn't pay for? \$51,000 in today's money is written off by the rascal. The wheat the other fellow owed on? The price was reduced by \$68,000! No matter how rich the boss was, that's real money.

Listening to the story as it goes along, you gotta believe Jesus is going to knock this rascal out of the park. He's thumbed his nose at all the rules. He has no respect for what belongs to the boss. He takes what plainly belongs to the boss and treats it as his own.

And yet, there it is, sitting in the gospel lesson today. Like a piece of unanchored flotsam drifting in the sea. Totally unexpected. Totally out of place. Yet there it is, sitting in your bulletin: "The master praised the steward!" What on earth is Jesus talking about?

There's a lot of talk these days about socialism (as in: "Obama is a socialist"). Every day as I pick up Tea from the Priory, I'm behind the car with the bumper sticker that shouts: Say No To Socialism!

There's a lot of talk these days about redistributing wealth, or not. There's a lot of talk these days about every person being responsible for his or her own success, or failure. In short, the rules of Mine and Yours are high up on the hot topic list these days. And when something gets up there like that, you and I, as followers of the way of Jesus Christ, we may want to take a peek at what our faith says about this topic of "mine" and "yours".

In the early church, from the Book of Acts, it is reported with pride that: "All the believers were of one heart and mind. No one claimed any of their possessions as their own, but they shared everything they had....There were no needy persons among them."

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard-pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn, their plenty will supply what you need. Then, there will be equality."

Some may look at that kind of equality as a kind of socialism or communism. As a kind of crazy far out idea.

Yet, the kind of generosity that the early Christians lived, that Paul encouraged the Corinthians to live, is still a step short of the generosity that explodes out of today's gospel lesson.

"Generosity?!" you say, "more like thievery!" But take a step back.

We say it all the time. "Everything belongs to God." "All I have is from God". And today, Jesus sits us down, pulls his chair right up to ours, and nose to nose, eyeball to eyeball, asks: "Do you really buy that?"

What the crooked employee did was to cancel a huge debt. He treated the master's money as if it were his own. He eliminated the distinction between what is mine and what is yours.

He trusted completely in the mercy of the master. He risked everything on the mercy of the master.

And then, something unexpected happens.

Remember the relationships between Master, the rascal and the debtors at the start of the story? The rascal was out to cheat the boss. The debtors hated the boss. The boss didn't trust the rascal. That's where everyone started.

Then, the rascal goes off and pulls this outrageous stunt; and the relationships between everyone change. The debtors praise the boss, the boss praises the rascal, and the debtors are relieved of their debt.

You know what this sounds like. You know!

It sounds like the Kingdom of God, in all its upsidedownness; in all its bizarre, joyful, exuberant rule-breaking.

Like when Jesus drove the establishment crazy going around forgiving sins, healing even on the holy day, feeding the hungry, raising the dead!

All for free. All for free.

Today's gospel drags us to the mirror of our orderly rule-bound society, our orderly, rule-bound lives, and says: "Look!"

Our rules help us to feel safe; but a love of safety so easily, so imperceptibly, yet so overwhelmingly, transforms lives meant for flight into lives lived in small enclosed rooms; rooms that, in time, become stuffy and lonely.

And if we get brutally honest about it all, the fact is, our rules seek to protect us from each other; to protect us even from God.

Today's gospel beckons us to peek out from our small, safe rooms, and begin to see that we are meant for each other; to see that what God threatens us with is life, life in all its fullness.

A fellow tells the story of playing hide and seek as a child. He finds himself the very best hiding place; there, under the porch, where no one ever looks. It is so fun hiding there, watching the other kids run by. He will never be found!

Then it dawns on him: he will never be found!

So he sticks out his toe; just his toe, and sure enough, he's tagged. He's it. And the fun of the game starts all over again.

Today, Jesus calls to us "All ye all ye in free!" Come in through the door of God's free grace! Come in through the grace that shatters our rules! A grace that shatters the distinctions between Mine and Yours. A grace that, in the shattering, sets us free to

create a world of abundance, to create a world of joy, to create a world of peace.

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