

Crooked Jesus

Our problem is that we want a savior who looks, thinks and acts just like us.

We want a savior who looks kindly on our national wars, but who goes bonkers over immigration.

Mostly, we want a savior who punishes the bad and rewards the good.

As long as I get to define what's bad — and who's good.

And all of that wanting — gets tossed right out the window today!

With this crazy gospel lesson.

As Jesus, the Lord of all that is good and right — pats a con man on the back, commending him to us as a great example of — what?

Being a rip-off artist?

Feathering his own nest?

Hello Jesus!

There's children in church today!

Why is Jesus shamelessly holding up a shyster as a role model?

As you know, the parable of the crooked steward follows immediately after the much loved parable of the prodigal son in Luke's gospel.

For reasons that are a mystery to me, the folks who put together our appointed readings decided to shuffle the prodigal son over to the season of Lent, which is a shame because the prodigal son and today's parable are all tied up with each another.

Think about it!

Both the prodigal son and the unjust steward blow right through other people's money.

The son wastes his dad's inheritance.

The steward writes off huge amounts owed to his boss.

Both the son and the steward find themselves in a real pinch.

The son is broke and feeding pigs.

Something like cleaning public toilets with a toothbrush.

The steward's about to be fired.

Too proud to beg.

Too weak to dig.

Both son and steward come up with plans to save their respective okoles.

"Aha!" says the son, "I'll be dad's slave!"

"Aha!" says the steward, "I'll feather my nest with the gratitude of those whose debts I'm reducing."

And the question you might be asking yourself right now is what do these parables have to do with our faith?

What on earth is Jesus getting at with these crazy stories?

In the first story, the prodigal returns home, and dad totally ignores his offer to be a servant.

Instead, dad gives this wayward child a huge party.

All while said wayward child offers no apologies, and makes no promises to never pull a stunt like that again.

In the second story, the unjust steward's been dipping into the till for a long time, which is why he's fired in the first place.

And then he takes an even bigger bite out of the master's bank account by giving huge discounts to what Jake and Ulrich owe for that wheat and corn they bought last year.

But instead of calling 911, the master pats him on the back.

How do you figure?

Well, maybe it's this.

One of the most serious charges leveled against Jesus is that he goes around forgiving sins, something, the good religious folks remind us, only God can do.

Worse, he forgives sins without folks even asking to be forgiven!

Which is particularly outrageous.

Our Book of Common Prayer has a lot to say about forgiveness; for those who truly and humbly repent, a condition that Jesus almost never imposes!

Remember that paralyzed guy whose pals tore through the roof and lowered the fellow down to Jesus' feet?

What does Jesus say?

"Because of THEIR faith, (pointing to his pals on the roof) your sins are forgiven!"

Or how about the gal caught with her pants down in the very act of adultery?

The snarling crowd with stones in hand can't wait to show her some of God's justice.

Only to have Jesus hold a mirror to their face, and in the facing, they walk away in shame.

Then, turning to the woman, asking -- not if she's sorry -- but, "does anyone condemn you?"

"No one, sir," she replies.

"Then nor do I condemn you."

Now, if forgiveness is God's kuleana, and if the right to forgive is something like God's money, something only God can spend, where does Jesus get off spending God's money like a drunken sailor?

Unless, the whole point of Jesus is to declare God's mercy -- to everyone?

As in, “when I am lifted up, I’ll drag the whole world to myself.” Jn. 12:32.

Perhaps one way to understand the story of the unjust steward is that the master has opened his bank account to all of us.

The currency is forgiveness.

And we are each of us encouraged to spend it — as extravagantly and enthusiastically as possible.

Because the question is almost never: “who needs to forgive?”

The question is almost always: “who doesn’t need to forgive?”

We live in a world of sharp elbows.

So whether it’s a parent who did a rotten job parenting, a brother who pulled a fast one a decade ago, a spouse who cheated, or a boss who’s a tyrant...

Who doesn’t need to forgive?

The problem, of course, is that I have such good reasons NOT to forgive!

Just reasons!

Logical reasons!

Ethical reasons that are unshakable and true!

But then here comes that pesky Jesus!

Barging into these private parts of my life with this strange tale of a crook — who gets patted on the back!

What does the unjust steward do?

He forgives.

He forgives things that he has no right to forgive.

He forgives for all the wrong reasons!

Given all of that, is there a moral to this story?

Perhaps it is that very troubling theme that runs throughout the gospels.

It's there after the disciples desert Jesus: "receive the Holy Spirit, those you forgive are forgiven...."

It's there as Jesus hangs from the cross: "Father, forgive them..."

It's there after Paul persecutes Christ's followers:

"But I received mercy..."

What's that disturbing theme?

Forgiveness.

Forgive it all.

Forgive it now.

Forgive it for any reason, or for no reason at all.

Don't forgive because you love the other person, if you're not there yet, just forgive.

Or maybe forgive because the Lord's Prayer says, "forgive us **as we** forgive....."

Or forgive because we suddenly realize that thinking my resentment is going to hurt the clown who hurt me — is like me eating rat poison — and expecting the rat to die.

Forgive because we're intimately connected with Jesus' power to forgive.

A power that frees sinners like us.

It all comes down to this.

"Deluded or sane, selfish or selfless, there is no bad reason to forgive." P. Nuechterlein.

And perhaps there is one other lesson to be pulled from the parables of the prodigal son and the unjust steward.

God isn't particularly interested in respectability.

For in the very midst of the sketchy, slippery, unjust steward, is the ministry of Jesus, who is constantly breaking the rules, touching the untouchables.

Consorting with riffraff.

And healing on the Sabbath.

Constantly dipping his hand oh so liberally into God's stockpile of forgiveness.

In the eyes of the good religious folks, Jesus is as crooked as the unjust steward.

It's no accident that he's crucified between two thieves, as all the good folks laugh while wagging their fingers, "let God save him!"

The problem with respectability is that it's often the unholy fruit of judgment and condemnation.

Our world is drowning in judgment and condemnation.

No, Jesus isn't respectable.

Instead, he becomes "sin for us sinners, weak for us weaklings, lost for us losers, and dead for us dead." Capon, Parables of Grace, 308-9.

Jesus pays every dime of our debt -- and then gives us the key to God's astonishing vault.

The one overflowing with that treasure called: "Forgiveness."

And Jesus says in no uncertain terms: spend it!

Spend it — wildly!

Spend it — foolishly!

Spend it for good reasons!

Or bad reasons!

Or for no reason at all!

But spend God's wealth of forgiveness, because, as Paul says to young Timothy today:

"This is exactly how our Savior wants us to live!" 1 Tim. 2:3 ("The Message" Tr.)

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