

The Big Spender

Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

So, this is a crazy gospel lesson.

Jesus, the Lord of all that is good and right and just — is patting a con man on the back and commending him to us as a great example of something....

But a great example of what????

Being a rip off artist?

Feathering his own nest?

And wouldn't you know we have a youngster here for baptism, and you gotta wonder what his family is thinking about this lesson!

A con man is a role model for our child???

Maybe we should check out the Buddhists!

As you know, the parable of the crooked steward follows immediately after the world famous 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 yank the parable of the prodigal son out of order, so we heard it last March instead of last week, which is a shame because the prodigal son and the unjust steward are all tied up with each another.

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 master.

Both the son and the steward find themselves in a real pinch: the son is broke and feeding pigs (a lot like cleaning public toilets with a toothbrush) and 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 necks: the son will become his dad's servant; the steward will feather his nest with the gratitude of those whose debts he knocks down.

What both of these parables suggest is an outrageous willingness of God to forgive, even in situations where we find it extraordinarily hard to forgive.

The son returns home, and dad completely ignores his offer to become a hired hand: throwing a huge party instead, where even more of dad's money is spent (some say wasted) with extravagance and joy.

No apologies, no promises to never pull a stunt like that again, not even a time out....

It's the same with the unjust steward.

This cad's been dipping in the till, 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 Aunty Patsy and Viliami Langi owe for that wheat and corn they bought last year...but instead of calling the cops and tossing the steward in the clink, the master pats him on the back.

So, what on earth is going on?

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

Worse, he goes around forgiving sins without folks **even asking** to be forgiven!

That's outrageous — even today.

For example, our Prayer Book talks a lot about forgiveness, for those who **truly and humbly repent**,....., a condition that Jesus almost never imposes!

Remember the paralyzed guy lowered through the open roof by his pals so he can be at Jesus' feet?

What does Jesus say?

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

And when the religious do-gooders object, he raises the stakes and tells the paralyzed man to get up and walk, and lo and behold, he does!

Or how about the gal caught with her pants down in the very act of adultery, the snarling crowd with stones in hand ready 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 repents, but, "does anyone condemn you...?"

"No one, sir," comes the answer.

"Then nor do I condemn you."

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

Unless ... the entire mission of Jesus is to declare God's mercy to everyone: and the only ones who can't get it are the ones who refuse to accept it.

Perhaps one take on 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.

Whenever people get together, 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 did a rotten thing a decade ago, a spouse who cheated, or a boss who is a tyrant,....well, 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!

And here comes Jesus, barging into these oh so private parts of my life, with this strange tale of the crook who is commended!

"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, for personal gain and to compensate for past misconduct.

So what on earth is the moral of this story.....?

Perhaps it is this, the theme that runs throughout the gospels: FORGIVE.

Forgive it all.

Forgive it now.

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

We don't have to do it out of love for the other person, if we're not there yet.

We can forgive because of the Lord's Prayer, you know, "forgive us as we forgive....."

We can forgive because we know what it's like to live with resentment and anger, and so we know that not forgiving is like me eating rat poison and expecting the rat to die.

We can forgive because we are connected with Jesus' power to forgive, a power that frees sinners like us.

Forgive because maybe it'll help your luck in Vegas, or bring some good Karma.

It all comes down to this: deluded or sane, selfish or selfless, there is no bad reason to forgive." P. Nuechterlein (modified and paraphrased).

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.

We can see in the sketchy, slippery, unjust steward the very ministry of Jesus, who constantly breaks the rules, eating and healing on the Sabbath; consorting with riffraff, constantly dipping his hand oh so liberally into God's stockpile of forgiveness.

In the eyes of many, Jesus is as crooked as the unjust steward, condemned to a crook's death, laughed at by all the good folks when God doesn't save him from the cross.

But respectability is too often about judgment and condemnation, and we live in a world that's drowning in judgment and condemnation.

Jesus sets all that aside.

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 our debt in full and completely -- and he gives each of us a key to God's bank vault; the one that is overflowing, the one labeled "Forgiveness;" and Jesus tells us each and every day: get going!, 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 Timothy today: "this is the way our Savior God wants us to live.....!" 1 Tim. 2:3 ("The Message" tr.)

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