

Forgive!

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?

My goodness, there are children here in church today!

A con man is a role model for them???

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 Spring 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 boss.

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

The son is broke and feeding pigs, (the ancient world's equivalence of 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 necks.

The son will become his dad's servant.

The steward will feather his nest with the gratitude of those whose debts he's reducing.

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 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 dad's been dipping into 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 Caren Esaki and Charles Steffey 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's 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!

Now that's outrageous — even today.

As you know, our own Book of Common Prayer talks a lot about forgiveness, but only 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 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 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!

But then here comes Jesus, barging into these oh so private parts of my life, with this strange tale of a 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, 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, "forgive us as we forgive...."

We can forgive because we know what it's like to live with resentment and anger; that not forgiving, and expecting that to hurt the guy I'm mad at, 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.

We can forgive because maybe it'll help our 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 the unholy fruit of judgment and condemnation, and truth be told, 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: 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 how our Savior wants us to live.....!" 1 Tim. 2:3 ("The Message" tr.)

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