

Other People's Money

Spending other people's money is such an easy thing to do.

When I was about 20 and in the seminary training to become a priest, an upperclassman left me his car to use for the summer.

It was an older car, and so he told me, if anything went wrong with it, here's my account information, just use the money to get the car fixed.

Well, as it turns out, all kinds of things went wrong with that car, and by the end of the summer, the car was working, but the fellow's bank account was wiped out.

He was not a happy camper when he found out.....

And it taught me a lesson as a young man about just how easy it is to spend other people's money.

That wing of the Republican Party known as the Tea Party is constantly arguing that the federal government is a big problem because it so easily spends other people's money.

And especially here in the church, where so much depends on your generosity, I can assure you the vestry is very cautious when it comes to spending the monies you have provided.

Spending other people's money is the theme of today's parable by Jesus, a tough, even scratch your head kind of parable that has Jesus praising a crook who freely spends his master's money; and it's also the theme of another well known parable that actually comes right before what we hear today: the parable of the prodigal son.

For reasons that are a mystery to me, the folks who put together our lectionary -- the book that has the readings appointed for each Sunday, well, those folks decided to yank the parable of the prodigal son out of order, so we heard it last March instead of last week.

Because as you know, in Luke's gospel, the parable of the unjust steward, which we heard today, comes right after the parable of the prodigal son.

Now, lest you start thinking I'm just rambling along here in search of a point, I mention all of this background because the prodigal son and the unjust steward are very much related to one another, quite connected in fact, and both get at something of the nature of God that you might find startling and even surprising.

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 job equivalent to cleaning public toilets with a toothbrush) and the steward's financial shenanigans have been found out and he's about to be put out on his ear: too proud to beg, too weak to dig.

Both son and steward talk to themselves about their predicament, and both come up with plans to get back in the good graces of their benefactors: the son plans to become his dad's servant; the steward is about to feather his nest with the gratitude of those whose debts he knocks down.

What I want to suggest to you is that both of these parables give us insight into an outrageous willingness of God to forgive in situations where human beings find it extraordinarily hard to forgive.

The son returns home, and dad doesn't even listen to his offer to become a hired hand: instead, a huge party is thrown, even more of dad's money is spent (some will say wasted) and the boy is made whole again.

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

It's the older brother who stands in for most of us as he harrumphs at the sheer unfairness of it all!

The same thing happens when we take a look at the unjust steward.

Here's a cad who'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 Roy Chee and Millie Goo 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 holds him up as a brilliant success story.

With all this flying at us, you sort of need to take a step back.....and do some remembering.

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

And, more outrageously, he goes around forgiving sins without folks even asking to be forgiven!

That's an outrage even to us today.

Our own prayer book talks about forgiveness, but for those who truly and humbly repent,....., a condition 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, (he says, pointing to the boys on the roof) your sins are forgiven!"

And when the religious mucky mucks object, he raises the stakes and tells the paralyzed fellow to get up and walk, and lo and behold, he gets up and strolls home!

Or how about the gal caught in adultery, the snarling crowd with stones in hand ready to show her some of God's justice; only to have Jesus make them face themselves, and in the facing, walk away in shame, and then turning to the woman and asking -- not if she repents, but rather, "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 controls, something only God can spend, where does Jesus get off spending God's money like a drunken sailor?

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

And so, the message, it seems, 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 lavishly and extravagantly and endlessly as possible.

Any time you get a group of people together, either here in the church or at the Elks Club or around the picnic table at the family reunion; 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 yesterday, or a decade ago, or a spouse who cheated, or a boss who can't seem to keep his face out of mine....well, who doesn't need to forgive?

The problem that so often comes up though is that I have such good reasons NOT to forgive: just reasons, logical reasons, respectable reasons that are unshakable and true!

And here comes Jesus, barging in to these oh so private parts of our lives, with this strange tale of the crook who is commended!

One minister puts it this way:

"What does the unjust steward do?"

The steward 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 the other person because of that whole business of what we pray in Jesus' name every Sunday morning, (you know, "forgive us as we forgive.....") and because we know we'd like forgiveness ourselves.

We can forgive because we know what it's like to live as unforgiving people, and so we know that not forgiving, (because we don't want to reward that so and so), is like me eating rat poison, hoping it will hurt the rat.

We can forgive because we are, or we want to be, connected with Jesus' power to forgive and free sinners like us.

Or we can forgive because maybe it'll help our luck on the next trip to Vegas, or maybe it'll bring some good Karma.

It all boils down to the same thing: deluded or sane, selfish or unselfish, there is no bad reason to forgive." P. Nuechterlein (modified and paraphrased).

And it seems there may be one other lesson to be pulled from the parables of the prodigal son and the unjust steward: and that is this: God isn't particularly interested in respectability.

We can see in the sketchy, slippery, unjust steward the very ministry of Jesus.

After all, Jesus constantly breaks the rules, eating and healing on the Sabbath; consorting with unclean riffraff, and constantly dipping his hand oh so liberally into God's stockpile of forgiveness.

In the eyes of the respectable folks, Jesus is every bit the crook as the unjust steward, and in fact, he's condemned to a crook's death, and he's laughed at and mocked by all the good folks when God doesn't save him from the cross.

But the problem with respectability is that it too often judges and condemns, and we live in a world that's drowning in judgment and condemnation.

Jesus sets that all 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 has paid our debts, in full, and forever and completely -- and he gives each of us a key to God's bank vault; the one that is over flowing, the one that cannot be contained, the one labeled "Forgiveness;" and Jesus tells us each and every day: go ahead, 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.)

+amen

