

## Sermon for September 19, 2010

Jesus probably picked up this morning's Gospel story from the local headlines and used it to answer his critics - the ones who despised his generosity of spirit. So, he offers a tale to explain the absurd generosity he was offering.

We may find it helpful to remember what leads up to this story - Jesus had consistently provoked the growing rage of his peers by freely forgiving the sins of those who came to him. He also healed them. In fact, Matthew recalls that his critics didn't mind the healings as much as they were angered by his daring to forgive sins. In an odd way, this story breaks open a new view of God's impulse to "give the farm away!"

This story in Luke of the rogue manager is most likely shows how Jesus totally mismanaged his role as a Rabbi. Yes that is right. Jesus broke the rules and mismanaged the rabbinic responsibility to mediate God's justice and carefully mete out forgiveness only after appropriate evidence that forgiveness had been warranted and the law had been satisfied. Just might this manager's irresponsible behavior be a description of the outrageous Divine generosity squandered on us.

There is no doubt that we would probably see Jesus if he were here today as a rogue. Jesus definitely would not make it through the ordination process. Jesus bypasses right belief, Baptism, synagogue membership and societal standing when he goes around forgiving and reconciling so recklessly. If you knew you could find Jesus on the street and experience Divine acceptance, would you want to go pay temple authorities?

Jesus seems to be offering "cheap grace." He heals ten lepers without even inquiring as to the sin that must have made them lepers in the first place. He forgives a woman caught in adultery without first asking her to certify that she would leave adultery behind. Jesus just gives these benefits away! All he asks is that those forgiven take up their crosses and follow him! Let's try some potential applications of this story:

Here's the first one. *What if the real objective of our churches were to train and nurture every follower of Jesus as rogue agents of God's radical and outrageous generosity?* What if we went

out on the streets giving away forgiveness? John recalls Jesus as saying, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

*There is a remarkable story that comes close to illustrating what this idea might look like! One of the most popular videos on U Tube has scored more than fifty million hits in five years - by the way that's 19 hits a minute every day for five years running! Here's the story. In 2004, an Australian that goes by the name of Juan Mann showed up at a party severely depressed and lonely. He recalls how that a random hug from a total stranger that night made him, in his words, feel like a king! It was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him. After that experience, he makes a sign offering "Free Hugs" and holds it up as an invitation at his local mall. The movement starts ever so slowly and invites all kind of resistance. But over the last six years, people in seventeen countries have received "Free Hugs" as random acts of kindness - selfless acts offered as healing to total strangers.*

"Isn't that our job?" How is it that a depressed and lonely man has to remind us? We need to be out there on those streets offering those free hugs on behalf of the living God. The Jesus of this parable came to convince us that God longs for us to be reconciled - set free to forgive and love and be made whole and love in return, unabashedly!

OK, here's another proposition for us to try on. *What if our way forward is to give away the very gifts we've been guarding so carefully behind our church doors?* Baptism as a rite of initiation was established as prerequisite for insider status long after Jesus' ministry. It was probably precipitated by the need to differentiate between insiders and outsiders during several decades of fierce persecution. If we decide to hold on to Baptism today, even though Jesus' practice never supported it, we need to judge the merits of this rite of initiation by its real time impact on those we baptize. Does this ritual act really impart a sense of the radical love that Jesus shows in this story? Does Baptism mark the beginning of a relationship with a faith community into a wholeness you can't get anywhere else?

Let's ask *how else might we freely offer the gifts of the church to the average person on the street?* Don't we expect strangers to make the effort to show up at our doors so we can show them Christian hospitality?

In a surprise variation on this, St Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco organizes members to stand busy Transit stations on Good Fridays, offering a smudge of ash and prayers for healing to strangers. They've taken ashes and oil and prayers and hugs and God's outrageous love to the streets two years in a row. and the response has been heartrending. So many have said words to the effect that, "Never before have we had the church come to us" or, "We couldn't make it to church but you brought God to us." *"Isn't that our job?" And, isn't that what Jesus models for us in this story?*

*What if we worked hard to make God's grace available to all? At this point we may find it helpful to remember that, just as franchises are built and maintained by holding out exclusive rights to the brand, religious establishments are tempted to claim a unique access to the Divine.*

No wonder Jesus' actions infuriated his peers! He was defying their constitutions and canons. You could even say that he had marked down the fee for Divine forgiveness so much that it was affordable to everybody! And it was accessible. *So, can you imagine what our world would be like if just a few of us started to freely forgive each other?*

Jesus holds out an invitation to us from 2000 years ago. He says if you forgive someone's sins, so does God. If you hold out on them, though, so does God. This is really almost a dare, isn't it? In the barest form of this story, Jesus praises the Manager for acting generously on the Master's behalf. He holds this out and dares us, "Go ahead, get lavish and give it away." Watch how all of creation is reconciled when you say "yes!" to this story.

Start today and invite someone new to our parish picnic! It is not too late!! Remember this thought for the day from Norman Vincent Peale:

“Empty pockets never held anyone back. Only empty heads and empty hearts do that.”

*Sermon based on: ["Jesus the Rogue Rabbi,"](#) the Rev. Thomas Brackett, Day 1, 2010.*