

“Crooked Saints”¹

September 18, 2016

I

“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

Now what the heck does that mean? This is, indeed, one of the most puzzling parables – you know, stories that Jesus told – one of the most puzzling in the New Testament. And scholars have labored over it for hundreds of years, trying to figure it out.

Now one way to think about it I guess is that Jesus was just being ironic here. You know, irony! Like what you actually mean is the exact opposite of what you say. Like somebody insults you and you say, “Well thanks a lot!” Or say you planned on going to the beach today and you get up, look out the window, and are greeted by sheets of stormy rain – you know, one of those days that the rain just won’t quit! And you mutter, “Oh great! What wonderful weather!” Mutter ... mutter ...

Now obviously you aren’t thankful for that insult, and you don’t think the weather is great! In fact, it’s just plain lousy! So that’s irony, folks! What you mean is definitely not what you say – in fact, just the opposite.

So. Back to Jesus’ little story here about the crooked servant. Maybe He’s just being ironic here too. So when he says, “Make friends for yourself with dishonest wealth,” maybe He really means just the opposite.

But oh well. Nice try. ‘Cause really, I don’t think Jesus was much given to irony. A little humor, yes. A little exaggeration to make his point, yes. But irony? I don’t think that’s really His thing. So I don’t think that simple interpretation really washes.

No, Luke here says that Jesus tells the story of a dishonest manager ... dishonest and crafty and shrewd. So let’s face it. I think maybe the best way to take this story is straight, to wrestle with its shocking story line – about a clever rogue who’s commended in the end. I mean, take it as it’s told, and struggle to try to figure out just what Jesus really meant here.

Now of course the Bible’s filled with rogue stories ... almost a rogue gallery, if you think about it. I mean, Abraham, the father of our faith, tried to pass his wife Sarah off as his sister, in order to save his own skin. And Jacob ... the Father of Israel ... the Father of the twelve tribes ... was one of the biggest rogues of all, a con man from the word go, conning his brother out of his birthright, double-crossing his conniving father-in-law Laban, making off with Laban’s daughters, as well as most of his flocks and his household gods to boot!

So maybe we could see this little story by Jesus, this story about a shrewd little con artist, this conniving manager, as a sort-of New Testament version of the Old Testament rogue stories.

In any case, when you first heard this story this morning, what did you actually hear ... where'd you put yourself in this story? I mean, you and I who are such law-abiding, rule-observing Christians ... where do you ... where do I fit into this scene? And what's Jesus really getting at here in this puzzling parable anyway? Let's think about it.

II

Let's think ... why would Jesus tell us a story like this, especially one that ends the way this one does? 'Cause the boss, the owner, says, "Well done you shrewd rascal you!" Now why would Jesus tell us a story like this?

I mean, here we sit at St. John's on a Sunday morning. Our pews are bolted to the floor. Everything's in its place. In fact, maybe that's a major reason why you and I come to church in the first place – to put everything in its place. I mean, in church you expect to hear stories about how folks follow the rules, do what's expected of them, and get what they deserve. That's justice! That's just desserts!

But then Jesus assaults us with this story of a little crook who gets caught, who realizes his shaky situation and takes drastic ... not too admirable action. And then, of all things, the master commends him for his savvy. I mean, I think it's a surprising, disrupting way to end this little story. But maybe ... on second thought ... that's just what Jesus wants to do here ... surprise ... disrupt you and me. By seeming to commend a rogue.

But think again about Abraham. Think again about Jacob. Think about David who connived to murder a man whose wife he's already committed adultery with. Yeah, he was sorry later, OK. But did the deed nonetheless. Think about all those rogues in our tradition, our faith family. Think about all the rogues you know. ... Think about your own rogue qualities.

See, I think there are two levels of reality in all these rogue stories of the Bible. There's the Divine level of reality, and then there's the human level of reality. And you know, looking at it that way, you could say ... you could say that our very existence is kind-of ironic, isn't it. I mean, there's God's righteousness ... the deepest truth of all ... and then there's the human reality ... the flawed, rogue-ish reality that God came into the world to save ... the reality of this world, full of human struggle, full of human, roguish deception, full of human strife.

So maybe Jesus isn't being ironic ... from a human point of view where I started out – about the insult, and weather, and all – but maybe He's being deeply ironic from God's point of view.

See, maybe the good news in all of this is that God's deep purpose unfolds in the midst of this whirling stew of human emotions and less than commendable behavior – this dishonest steward's behavior and your own ... and mine. God's purpose somehow realized through the mess of our lives ... maybe ... in spite of our roguish ways.

III

In Graham Greene's classic novel *The Power and the Glory*, there's this very shady character, always referred to as the "whisky priest." And he's such a good, flawed character – a rogue par excellence – that I think he fits so well here to make my point. So please just bear with me a minute or two while we look.

Now if you remember the story, this priest's grown fat eating up the peasants' food at their poor celebrations. See, this whisky priest's a kind of leech, baptizing and celebrating the Sacrament of the Mass, partly 'cause this provides him with prestige, partly 'cause these doings bring in fees, and give him entry to the parties after the baptisms, and the weddings, and the funerals. So the sacrament of Christ's death is the key to his whole, roguish life.

But now if you remember ... as the Mexican state became more and more opposed to the church, celebration of the mass became a dangerous, criminal act, finally punishable by death. But then this shrewd, shady priest, for some unfathomable, God-knows-what reason, hangs around his home area, rather than high-tailing it out to save his own skin.

And not only that, but he continues to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice ... even hoards a little wine ... doesn't drink it up, hoards it so he can consecrate it for God's people ... until this holy act finally leads to his own death ... this death of a shady, rogue priest, still able to turn wine into the blood of Christ ... 'til a firing squad splattered out his own blood against the wall behind him.

And then the peasants he couldn't bring himself to abandon ... those poor folks he couldn't abandon ... couldn't stop offering the sacrament to, now they begin seeing him as a martyr. And through this disreputable, roguish, but saintly martyr, their faith in life and their hope in God's hidden presence in their suffering world is renewed.

So. My take-home point is this: God's Divine purpose – ironically – can shine through the human muck of our flawed lives.

Well finally. I think you have to love Jesus for telling a story like this one ... telling it to folks like you and me, poking at us a bit.

See, it's like this. Here you and I sit – trying to puzzle out the rules, and yes, still thinking that maybe the kingdom of God is a matter of getting 'em right – being oh so respectable in following them.

But then here comes Jesus, telling us a disrupting story of a guy who's not particularly respectable, even commending him in his unrespectability ... or despite it. In the end – I think maybe it's a joke on our self-righteousness ... a "sad and holy joke" on us all.

'Cause just think. Jesus did actually take on some of our own unrespectability, didn't He ... carrying it all the way to the cross ... seeming to actually enjoy eating and drinking with sinners along the way. And well ... maybe when you do stop and think about it ... let's hope so. Let's hope that Jesus is able to smile and to take some delight in even your own shady dealings ... and mine ... trusting that He doesn't mind eating and drinking with sinners. 'Cause right now ... like that weak whisky priest and his people ... we're

getting ready to celebrate the Eucharist. And if Jesus doesn't really want to be with sinners at this table, then I'm afraid He's gonna be all alone at our altar.

But then Jesus did say that He came into the world to save all us sinners ... all us children of this age ... and yes – all us children of God-given light. And how lucky it is for all us rogues that we don't have to deal with a God who's only just. Lucky for us rogues that it's a forgiving God who waits for us ... in the end.

Amen.

¹ Resources used: Luke, by Fred Craddock (Interpretation series); The Power and the Glory by Graham Greene (Viking Penguin, copyright 1940); Synthesis for September 18, 2016 ("The Crafty Steward"); "Reflections of the Lectionary" for September 18, 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Christian Century, August 31, 2016, p. 21.