

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**One of my favorite images of Christ is entitled "The Laughing Jesus". I have a sketch of it hanging in the Rectory. It is my favorite because I am convinced that Jesus really enjoyed being alive, being one of us, and had a fantastic sense of humor. I believe that sense of humor is on display in this parable today about the dishonest steward or manager.**

**Theologians have long puzzled over this parable. Preachers have been stumped by it. Some Biblical scholars believe that even St. Luke was embarrassed by it, because he hurriedly supplements it with other of Jesus' sayings on the subject. What, do you suppose, is the cause of such befuddlement with regard to this parable?**

**Well, all of us who love stories, especially love stories where the good guys win out in the end. For instance, there is the delightful story about a farmer some years ago in a village in India who owed a large sum of money to the village banker. The fat, bald, old banker fancied the farmer's beautiful daughter, so he wanted to make a deal. He would forgive the farmer's debt if he could marry the farmer's daughter.**

**Both the farmer and his daughter were horrified by the proposal, but the cunning moneylender suggested that they let providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag. The girl would have to reach in and pick one pebble from the bag. If she picked the black pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be forgiven. If she picked the white pebble, she need not marry him and her father's debt would still be forgiven. If she refused to pick a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail until the debt was paid.**

**They were standing on a pebble-strewn path outside the bank, with a crowd now gathered around them. As they talked, the banker bent over to pick up two pebbles. The sharp-eyed girl noticed that he had picked up two black pebbles and put them into the bag. He then asked the girl to pick a pebble. Now, imagine that you were the girl standing there on the street. What would you have done? If you had to advise her, what would you have told her? Careful analysis would produce three possibilities: (1) the girl could refuse to take a pebble but her father would then be thrown into jail; (2) the girl could pick a black pebble and sacrifice herself in order to save her father from debt and imprisonment; or (3) the girl could pull out both black pebbles in the bag, expose the banker as a cheat, and likely incite his immediate revenge, and a possible riot.**

**So, here is what the girl did. She put her hand into the money bag and drew out a pebble. Without looking at it, she fumbled and let it fall onto the pebble-strewn street, where it immediately became lost among all the other pebbles. "Oops!" she said. "But it doesn't matter. Just look into the bag for the one that is left and you'll be able to tell which pebble I picked." Since the remaining pebble was black, it would have to be assumed that she had picked the white one. And since the banker dare not admit his dishonesty, the girl would**

have changed what seemed an impossibly bad situation into a great victory for herself and her father.

Isn't that a great story! A seemingly defenseless, hopeless girl outsmarts the evil, cunning banker, and wins the day for her family.

But, that's not the kind of story Jesus tells in this parable. At the end of the story he actually praises the crooked manager and his wily way of enriching himself at the expense of the master, his boss. Why is this?

Some Biblical scholars suggest that, since this parable follows the parable of the Prodigal Son, it's really a story about forgiveness. The crooked manager is actually being praised for forgiving his boss' debtors. This makes some sense insofar as Jesus often preached about forgiveness and grace, and wanted his listeners to try to comprehend the extravagance of God's forgiving love.

Other theologians believe this is a parable that is chiefly about the corrupting influence of money. St. Luke seems to interpret the parable in this way. Jesus had more to say about money than any other topic. Especially in the Gospel of St. Luke, there are more passages about money than there are about death, marriage, or family values. Jesus warned time after time about the dangers of riches. And we know it's true we cannot serve God and money. This interpretation is especially worthy of our consideration in this consumer-driven society in which we live.

Money may be our greatest national obsession. It is estimated that almost one-half of all divorces is about money. Money is often at the root of almost half of all reported cases of spousal abuse. Money is certainly the cause of our government's current paralysis. And who controls the money and the natural resources that beget money is the cause of just about every war that is currently being fought throughout this broken, sin-sick world in which we live.

But, there is a third alternative in understanding this parable that I would suggest that we might consider. Jesus is not praising the crooked manager for his dishonesty in cheating his employer; nor is he praising him for making friends for himself by forgiving his master's debtors. Rather, he is praising him for his ingenuity and his initiative. He is commending him for taking charge of his life and getting himself out of a tight situation. To me, that's the plain meaning of this parable.

The man doesn't sit down and cry, "Woe is me". He doesn't bellyache and complain and worry about the future. He takes charge of his future. That's what Jesus is telling his disciples that he admires in the crook. I believe that's what he is saying when he says, "For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

**This parable he is directing to his disciples, and to us. He was telling them, and us, "Look, I know you are really nice people, really good people, and that's ok, but I need you to be more than nice. I need you to get out there and make a difference in the world. You're going to be called trouble-makers and radicals and worse, and every other name in the book. Don't worry about it. I need you to go out there and turn the world on its head."**

**That's very similar to the message of Pope Francis at the World Youth Day in Brazil a few weeks ago when he said of his expectation of the outcome of the event, "I want to see a mess coming out of Rio. I want a mess in the dioceses and the parishes and the schools." What he was saying, and what Jesus is saying in this parable is, "Set this world on fire with your faith. Stop being so nice! Get off your butts and make something happen to build up God's Kingdom on earth. The worldly know how to do it! The crooks know how to do it! Don't sit back waiting for God to change this world. Do it yourselves!"**

**Do you find yourself complaining and bellyaching about the way things are in the world? Are you often finding fault with the Church? Are you concerned about the future that we are developing for our children and grandchildren? Are you young people disengaged because you don't think you can make a difference or you just don't care?**

**Well, Jesus is saying; Pope Francis is saying, and I am saying, "Shame on you! Shame on you! Crooks and evil money-hungry people are doing better than you! Learn from them, if you must, but do something! Commit yourself as mightily as they do! Build up the Kingdom of God!" That is the work of the disciple of Jesus Christ!**