

For as long as there have been stories, whether they are folk tales, epic ballads, operas, literature, comics, or movies, there have always been those characters that play a vital role, but are hard to pin down when it comes to which side they are on. They are not the evil villain nor monster. They are not the hero. They are far from being the victim or innocent by-stander. And although it may be difficult to decipher which side they are on, the role of the trickster is as important as all the other characters. Maybe even more so.

Tricksters are found in the stories of every age and culture. From the mischievous Monkey King in Eastern culture, to Hermes in Greek mythology, and Loki in both Norse mythology and the Marvel Universe. Native American culture has its Coyote, and Western African culture has cool, super smart, and eloquent Anansi, the trickster who most often takes the form of a spider; and, according to a folk tale from Ghana, tricked the sky god into giving him all the world's stories. It is believed Anansi's stories were so influential they gave hope to people enslaved in both the Caribbean nations and southern United States and inspired people oppressed by slavery to hide secret messages in songs and folk tales which led to the successful escape of hundreds of human beings from slavery.

In our modern times we may be more familiar with tricksters like Tom Sawyer, the Cheshire Cat, Fred and George Weasley from the *Harry Potter* series, and a pirate named Captain Jack Sparrow from the popular *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise.

No matter what genre we find these and other tricksters, they all play a vital role: they use their intelligence and wits cleverly and creatively to get what they want in ways that upset the social order and affect the other characters in the story. In other words, Tricksters undermine the assumed authority and status quo, often exposing the injustice underneath systems and society, and sometimes even inspire the heroes to fight for a change for the better. The tricksters help us see more deeply into a story. That is why when we encounter tricksters, we often find ourselves liking them, even if we aren't sure we can trust them. But as we watch how the trickster can remain calm in a crisis, quickly assess what resources are available, the best ways to use those resources, do so in ways that amaze or surprise us, and lead us to question assumptions, we might discover there is something we can all learn from them.

Those tricksters might help us gain a deeper insight to the parable we heard Jesus tell in today's Gospel about a wealthy man and his dishonest manager. This parable has been called a lot of things by Biblical scholars, commentators, and

preachers over the years, but the word used most often to describe it is the word confusing. Laborious amounts of work have been put into trying to deconstruct this parable to make it easier to comprehend and more comfortable.

The usual route commentators and scholars take is to treat the parable like an allegory where the wealthy man is God. And God has a hard time finding good employees, which are all of us. So, the moral of the story is we all need to be better at sharing what God gives us. And that's not a bad interpretation, it certainly can be applied to the church and the care of creation. But parables are not allegories. There can be more, much more to them.

N.T. Wright, the former bishop of Durham, scholar, theologian, and author of many books, has interpreted this parable as Jesus' criticism of Israel who has not followed God's ways, and in light of the accounting God will give them, to re-think the practice of tightening up on the religious laws and figure out where flexibility can be found so as to reach out and include more people. Again, this is not a bad interpretation. It's helpful and can even be applied to our modern church.

And then, the late theologian, scholar, and author of many books including *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle who in a sermon she gave on this parable, asked the question, "Why do we have to assume the wealthy man in this parable is God?" It seemed to her, doing so created a situation where interpreters had to do a lot of work defending God instead of focusing on the manager and recognizing the manager's skills at creativity and the ability to think clearly and calmly under pressure, which are good qualities. After all, there are no guidelines given out by Jesus anywhere in the Gospels that says the characters described as wealthy landowners are always a stand in for God in all the parables Jesus told. Perhaps Jesus was a better, more nuanced storyteller than that.

This question led to pastor and fellow scholar in Emergence Christianity, Brian McLaren to interpret this parable through the lens of the economic system from the time when Jesus told this parable. McLaren reminds us the backdrop for the Gospels is the Roman occupation. And one of the things Romans did to ensure their domination over any country they occupied was to pit the rich against the poor. One way the Roman government accomplished this was by heavily taxing the people of the country they occupied, which made it extremely difficult for the working poor, like the farmers and tradespeople. This Roman tax was an additional tax to the others they had to pay and this where the wealthy people of the same culture would see an opportunity to profit from the situation. They would often pay the taxes for the poor farmer or tradesperson, in exchange for ownership of the land. The wealthy person allowed the farmer or tradesperson continue to live on and work the land, but as a tenant, whose rent was in the form of a percentage of whatever they grew or made or earned. To

collect these goods, the wealthy person sent a manager who dealt directly with the tenant. Once the wealthy person was in possession of these goods, they sold them to the Romans. It was a system where the wealthy benefited, the poor suffered, and the manager was in the middle, with his work benefiting the wealthy who didn't have to see how they hurt both parties.

Which is why when Brian McLaren reads this parable, he sees the dishonesty of the manager in a different light; like that of a trickster, someone who uses what he has to get what he wants and turns the tables on the authority, affecting those around him in the process. According to McLaren, when the manager realized he was going to lose his job, he used his intelligence and his role to side not with the wealthy, but the poor persons by reducing what they owed. This made the manager popular with the poor and caused the wealthy man to realize his manager has some good skills and is not afraid to use them in a crisis.

One of my favorite tricksters, Captain Jack Sparrow, explained all this quite clearly in the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, the *Curse of the Black Pearl* when he said: "I'm a dishonest man. And a dishonest man you can always trust to be dishonest. Honestly." For those who don't remember the movie, what appeared to be dishonest behavior led to the capture of the bad guys, rescuing the good guys, and seeing the characters in a new light, ultimately that behavior was understood to be for the greater good. This is just another way to say McLaren sees this parable as the dishonest manager using his dishonesty to switch sides so that it was the poor who found some relief, that is where McLaren saw the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Perhaps the question for us that is most helpful as we look at the many facets of this parable is who do we find ourselves empathizing with? If we feel for the wealthy man, we might want to ask ourselves why. Because we think we have to? Or because we've been conditioned to? Or we admire his change of perspective? If we find ourselves drawn to the manager, we might ask ourselves if we have an affinity for tricksters and can appreciate or maybe even envy their ability to turn the tables on unjust establishments. Or if we feel the burden of debt of any kind, maybe it is easy imagine and envy the blessed relief those debtors felt when their debt was reduced. Perhaps today we can also ask ourselves to look closely at the actions of these characters: the wealthy man who called the manager into account for his dishonesty and ended up impressed with how he performed under pressure, the manager who kept his head in a crisis and used that very crisis to undermine the authority of an economic system, or the debtors who were given some relief, and then ask: where do we see resurrection life? Where do we see actions like mercy, forgiveness, renewal, liberation from oppression, and turning the tables on oppressive systems, all of which are hallmarks of God's Kingdom?

Perhaps at the heart of this parable is Jesus warning his listeners that things like wealth and power can be temptations that can make us forget who we are, whose we are, and what love looks like. Perhaps today's parable invites us to remember we are God's beloved, that God loves us and we are to use what we have: our creativity, our finances, our skills, our time, our energy, etc. in order to make God's Kingdom a little more real to all people here on earth by loving God with our whole selves and loving our neighbors as ourselves more than we love anything else.

Here at Church of the Good Shepherd, that looks like our CrossRoads Café coffee shop ministry, especially when we invite people who don't have cash to participate in our pay-it-forward system instead of spending the equivalent of one month's salary for our coffee shop staff on a credit and debit card reader system. And how we set up our thrift store on an honesty policy, expecting people who purchase items to put the money for their purchase in a box by the door. In both the pay-it-forward model in CrossRoads Café and the honesty policy in the Thrift Store, we have seen what we believe are expressions of God's love make a few folks feel confused and uncomfortable because it turns the tables on the way most of us are accustomed to doing business. But often these folks come around, and experience what we want them to experience: God's love, refreshment and welcome to be part of life here at Church of the Good Shepherd, even if it is only through the coffee shop or thrift store.

So, maybe God's love could be seen as is the greatest trickster of all, turning the tables, raising the dead, and changing the world through our actions, as it slowly transforms into the Kingdom of Heaven God dreams it can be.