
Making Holy Mischief

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 20, Year C

Deacon Lawrence's back was up against the wall. The Roman Emperor Valerian had just issued an edict: all Christian clergy should be executed and the Church's property confiscated. The Pope, Sixtus II was rounded up and killed along with four other deacons, but Lawrence, in charge of the church's finances, was spared. The prefect of Rome summoned Lawrence, demanding that he hand over all the treasures of the Church. "Three days, sir. Please give me three days to gather up all the treasures," Lawrence answered.

His back was up against the wall. Against the might of the Roman empire, one deacon didn't stand a chance. There was no way out, or was there?

During those three days, Lawrence scurried around Rome, giving away as much of the Church's wealth as possible, filling the pockets of the city's beggars. On the third day, Lawrence gathered up his new-found friends, the sick and the poor, the orphans and the widows, and marched with them back to the prefect's palace. "Here!" Lawrence declared. "Here are the treasures of the church!"

The prefect had been had. Enraged, he condemned Lawrence to death: roasted alive on a gridiron. As the hot flames lapped at the good deacon, St. Lawrence got the last laugh, joking with his executioners: "Turn me over; I'm done on this side."

St. Lawrence was not the first, nor the last, to engage in holy mischief in service of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus seems to love this kind of shrewdness, this cleverness.

This morning, Jesus tells us a story about a dishonest manager, a scrappy, streetwise guy caught up in the consequences of his actions. Facing financial ruin, the man rewrites the books in his clients' favor, making sure when the dust settles, he'll have a friend or two to lean on. And when all is said and done and his plot is discovered, his master praises him??

Parables captivate our imagination because of their strangeness: why does the dishonest manager find himself praised by the master he has just ripped off? What is admirable about breaking the rules? Why does Jesus hold this man up as an example for his disciples? Jesus says, "I want you to be shrewd in the same way, but for what is right!"

To be clear, Jesus is not exhorting us to dishonesty. He is urging us to embrace the crafty creativity needed to withstand the violent vagaries of a sin-sick world. When the crisis came, the manager saw exactly what was at stake, and he acted. He used every ounce of wit he had to carve a future out of the wreckage.

And if a shady steward can find a way out of no way, imagine what God can do.

Jesus hung on the cross. The world had rejected the Son of God. Rome had made its point. Sin and death had made their demand. And God said, "Give me three days." And three days later, the rugged cross became the tree of life. The tomb was found empty; the ledgers wiped clean. The resurrection is God's holy mischief, God's cosmic shrewdness, God's last laugh.

If this is what God has done for us, why should we ever live like we are trapped, like our backs are against the wall, like there is no other option but to give into the demands of sin and death?

As Christians, we are called to be more than passive bystanders, goody-two-shoes unwilling to color outside the lines. Our faith calls us to more. We are never cornered. Not by fear. Not by sin. Not even by death.

No, we are called to holy mischief. To use every ounce of our wit to find creative solutions to carve the kingdom out of the chaos of this world.

Holy mischief forgives debts, both the ones on the ledger and the ones in our hearts.
Holy mischief stacks the deck with aces and tips the scales towards mercy and justice.
Holy mischief lampoons the powers that be and laughs in the face of those who try to scare us into submission.

This is what the saints have always done. We may think of saints as sweet and spotless, but they were rarely tame. St. Lawrence resisted Rome, losing his life but saving his soul. St. Maximilian Kolbe refused to let Auschwitz claim his God-given agency, stepping forward to take the place of another prisoner slated for death. St. Oscar Romero would not allow the terrorizing Salvadoran government turn the altar into a propaganda platform, transforming worship itself into holy mischief. Saints are remembered for their shrewdness, their unwillingness to play nicely with the world, their insistence on living lives of good trouble.

If Lawrence, Kolbe, and Romero could find courage to act in the shadow of empire, what keeps us from acting?
What keeps us from forgiving debts?
What keeps us from speaking mercy into systems that grind people down?
What keeps us from living with all the crafty creativity of the resurrection?

The answer is: nothing. Nothing can keep us from the resurrection life. Nothing can keep us from the Kingdom of God. Not fear. Not sin. Not death.

So go and live like it.
Go and get clever for the Gospel.
Go and make some holy mischief.
And when the world comes asking to see the treasure of the Church, make sure they find you.