

Homily 9 November 25 Luke 20:27-38 William D. Glenn+

Lord, Messiah, Son of Man. To these titles for Jesus, I would add: Trickster. A sacred trickster, but a trickster, nonetheless.

The great mythologist Lewis Hyde, a MacArthur Genius Awardee, wrote a magnificent book, *Trickster Makes the World*, in which he investigates and explicates the trickster archetype as seen through almost all cultures.

The trickster is the one who speaks in paradox and confounding parables, a boundary smasher, the framer of a *new frame* of rules which are not rules at all, the one who casts shame on its debilitating ear and liberates the psyche, the soul, and thereby reveals the shamer's dark work to control us. The idol smasher, the unleasher of a particular kind of spiritual complexity.

The trickster demands that we see what is in front of us.

Jesus is all of these, and so much more.

In this familiar passage from Luke, the Sadducees were the group of Jews in Palestine, typically wealthy, Hellenistic—read lettered—who dominated the Sanhedrin, the supreme court and legislature of Jewish life in Jerusalem and Judea. These six dozen men worked with the Roman occupiers, denied the resurrection and believed that the Temple, which they controlled, as the only path to God.

They saw themselves as *pretty tricky and* spent an inordinate amount of time—along with their Pharisaical cousins—trying to trick Jesus. It like fraudsters v trickster, still a living pattern.

But to what end? To maintain their spiritual and political hegemony? To protect their interpretation of the Law over against this *right-out-in-the-open* lawbreaker? To satisfy the Roman occupiers with whom they did their self-serving business. To prevent Pharisees or Zealots or the Essene from becoming the ruling party over Judaism? Perhaps all the above. A familiar story, I know.

Clearly Jesus was labelled the *enemy*, though he himself was nothing but a wandering preacher, a healer, just but a devout Jew.

Jesus began to be followed, later hunted down.

They wanted to trap this Galilean, he from the rougher north, to discredit, and soon, excise him, and his increasingly large and boisterous following of outsiders. And excise him not just from the temple precincts, but from Jerusalem, from Judea. They were sure their masked goons could accomplish this task.

Being so clever, they pose legal questions to Jesus to trick him, as almost all the questions posed to Jesus throughout the Gospels were legal questions—he cures people on the Sabbath, for God’s sake! —but Jesus was, in so many ways, not interested in this debate, this mindset, these exegetical traps.

If a brother dies and he has many brothers, which one of his many brothers is responsible for marrying his other brothers’ widow, and if he dies, she is to marry yet another brother, until she has been espoused to all seven, each of whom died. And as the text says, Finally the woman died. I bet she did and I bet she died exhausted. So in the Resurrection—in which we do not believe—whose wife will she be, Jesus?

In response, Jesus creates his own complicated, yes, tricky, answer. He upends the legalisms on which the Sadducees profited, thrived and ruled. In the end, he asserts clearly, God is the God of the living,

The Sadducees were not the only group trying to trick the Sacred Trickster: the Pharisees with their high purity codes, the revolutionary Zealots, defiantly had rage and violence the quiet and pious Essenes withdrew and isolated themselves. The Sanhedrin, protective of their power, had their purposes for sure, abetted by the scribes, the interpreters of the Torah.

Those working to trick Jesus, the religious establishment of Judea, clearly wanted to rid themselves of this charismatic, and quite evidently, holy man

Jesus, this sacred trickster, instead, proffered a new way of life, and preached a God of mercy and love, a God transforming us—psychologically, spirituality, relationally—and inviting us to be fully alive, to be fully conscious. This way of knowing God, this One Jesus affectionately—and boldly—called *abba*, almost like daddy, even though that name might just embarrass us, so tender it is. A new reign, a new way, is being realized in this Galilean's person. And this way, this vision, upset that very establishment, as he still does today.

Jesus is, of course, much more than a sacred trickster, though in my life, and I suspect in your life, too, he seems to like this mode for getting our attention. What was dark is made a source of light, to our own absolute notions of what faith entailed, he smashes through with liberating grace, for our hidebound perfectionism, he creates

salvific chaos, for our fear of being loved, he overwhelms us with an super abundance. New life emerges.

And when necessary, he leads us into the desert where we stay until we are able to cry a deep and soulful *enough*, finally giving up control, coming out of a dark night, chastened and freed.

He even tricked some of us into finding Incarnation, as he walked us through that red door on Mendo into this most beloved community, where we are being saved from ourselves, saved by and for love.

We each have our catalogs of where we were tricked into goodness, relationship, community, perhaps sobriety, friendship, service, hope, joy. Yes, we each have our dark nights, yet here we are, our wounded souls, and yet, here we are, invited by this cagey One who works with us *just as we are*.

Jesus belonged to none of the many forementioned complicated paths or parties or power grabs of 1st century BCE Palestine. While he honored the law and the Temple rituals and the scriptures, he led those who would follow him into this New Way, the Way of Love.

The Way of Love, as St. Theresa Lisieux called it, the *Little Way of Love*. That's a tricky way, too. The beatitudes require some seismic shifting on our parts, the work of a lifetime. But for grace. Last week's Gospel requires some spiritual ju-jitsu to imbibe its instructions, the call to a radical and inclusive and decisively bold life of presence, as was called to us in last week's demanding sermon. Jesus upside-downs our cushy lives and complacent places in the landscape in which we live, and he invites us to more.

Mesiter Eckhart says *There never was a person who forsake herself so much that she could not find more in herself to forsake*. Tricky? Impossible? Indeed, but for love.

Love is the path lit for us, lit by the manger, lit by the cross, lit by the Spirit, lit by dreams, lit by the small still voices in each of us. And lit by each other.

As we are part of the Jesus movement, we are called to this tricky, grace-flushed Way of Love.

And we are guaranteed that the One who calls us sustains us, the One we receive at the rail in a few minutes. Enough for us, is enough for us.