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“Prepare a full account of your stewardship” (Luke 16:2).

*Phil 3:17—4:1; Luke 16:1-10*

One of the hardest discernments in both life and religion is how to balance justice and mercy. This quandary is expressed many ways; a choice between law and leniency, letter and spirit, a hard heart and a soft head or a soft heart and a hard head, between enabling and tough love. Blaise Pascal wrote that “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know,” and for liberality, Oscar Romero once noted that “the heart is on the left.” Yet, justice must be rendered, and we need wise judges who have experienced hearts, for hard decisions reveal that the greatest distance is from the head to the heart and back again to the head.

Jesus scandalized his critics by being too merciful, for undermining the need to deter evil with punishment and for diminishing God’s absolute role as Judge. When they accused him of misrepresenting God, Jesus offered an astonishing parable about a steward accused of squandering his master’s property and ordered to submit a full accounting. To ingratiate himself with his clients, he furtively cuts their debts. The fraud is outrageous, yet the master praises him for his foresight and ingenious bookkeeping.

The parable seems to praise dishonesty until we grasp its startling admission. Jesus is the steward who has been “giving away the store” by squandering God’s love on everyone, including sinners. This is the Gospel, the heart of an even more radical call to “love your enemies” in order to be like the heavenly *Abba*, who loves good

and bad alike. Justice will be satisfied when Jesus takes everyone's sins on himself. His death on the cross will reveal divine mercy as God's plan to redeem the world.

The Gospel continues to scandalize us for its radical pacifism, rejecting "just wars" and capital punishment. Pope Francis shocks bishops for his openness to couples in second marriages receiving Communion or for his support for LGBTQ civil unions. We are left to grapple with Jesus' parables of mercy, like yesterday's about lost sheep and lost coins, and the third and most challenging one in Luke 15, the magnificent "Prodigal Son."

Jesus stands as the balance point between justice and mercy, revealing both as expressions of divine love, one to purify, the other to perfect. God's ways are not our ways, a mystery that gives us more questions than answers, more ideals than instructions. But we believe that Jesus was the human face of God when he showed unlimited mercy to everyone. He revealed just how scandalous and controversial it can be to forgive enemies and let sinners off the hook. He modeled for us how to be wise stewards of God's love, knowing we will lose our balance at times, but that it is always better to err on the side of mercy.

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