

Newlyweds, Chris and I had come to the MALL for some post-wedding shopping, bringing with us the large envelope containing the GIFT CERTIFICATES we'd received at our wedding earlier that year.

It was I who had custody of the envelope as we moved through MACY'S, and I who—for reasons I can't recall—put the envelope on the bench next to Chris as she tried on new shoes.

While she went about her business, something in the adjacent section of the store caught my eye so I went to check it out.

I was gone just a minute, but when I returned, neither the envelop with the gift vouchers nor Chris were where I'd left them. The ensuing conversation sounded something like this:

ERIK: HONEY, WHERE ARE THE GIFT CERTIFICATES?

CHRIS: I THOUGHT YOU HAD THEM, DEAR.

ERIK: WELL, I PUT THEM DOWN RIGHT NEXT TO YOU.

CHRIS: YOU PUT THEM DOWN...

ERIK YES, WHILE YOU WERE TRYING ON SHOES.

CHRIS WELL, I DIDN'T PICK THEM UP & I DON'T KNOW WHERE THEY ARE.

Upset at myself but trying valiantly to deflect blame, I quickly concluded that the envelope with all our gift vouchers had been stolen. We agreed that Chris would look for the store manager while I stayed put.

And that's when the woman with a big black purse, sitting on the very bench where Chris had been trying on shoes, caught my attention.

I looked at her clutching her bag, and I thought: THAT PURSE OF HERS IS PLENTY BIG ENOUGH TO HOLD OUR ENVELOPE OF CERTIFICATES!

The more I thought about it, the more suspicious—and convinced—I became. Those gift certificates were in there...I knew it—beyond a shadow of a doubt!

I wanted in the worst way to ask her point blank if she'd picked up our envelope, but instead of asking her, I simply stood there, arms crossed, my anger smoldering.

Finally, Chris came back from talking to the store manager and, lo and behold, she was carrying the certificates. Someone had turned them in.

And it was now crystal clear that the woman with the big black purse, the woman who'd been the target of my suspicions and unspoken anger, the woman who hadn't moved

since the whole incident began, was completely innocent.

I felt ashamed for the way I'd reacted; for the way I'd tried to find someone to blame; for the way I'd become captive to SUSPICION.

I hoped that the woman with the big purse hadn't FELT THE ARROWS I'd been sending her way—yet, how could she not?

Suspicion is a poison. The movies we make up in our minds about what's happening around us—about relationships, about motives, about intent—so often end up being traps.

Perhaps John and the other disciples had a similar experience in today's gospel. Not about the theft of personal property, but the theft of Jesus' name and power.

They'd come across a man casting out demons, a man they do not know, and immediately they'd grown suspicious.

**WHAT RIGHT HAD HE TO BE USING JESUS' NAME—
HE WASN'T PART OF THEIR GROUP!**

And there may have been more than just suspicion at work. There may have been jealousy, too.

Earlier in chapter nine is an episode about a man who'd brought his demon-possessed boy to Jesus' disciples, but they were unable to cure him.

Now, they meet a man outside of their circle who is having some success. Maybe it chaffs a bit to see someone succeed where they had failed.

**JESUS—WE SAW SOMEONE CASTING OUT DEMONS IN YOUR NAME,
AND WE TRIED TO STOP HIM BECAUSE HE'S NOT ONE OF US.**

Suspicion and jealousy affect both the accuser and the accused.

In her book CASTE, Isabel Wilkerson describes how she arrived in Detroit on assignment after an early-morning flight, eager to get to work.¹

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontent*. (New York: bRandom House, 2020) pp. 219-223. The description I include here is excerpted in part from a review of CASTE by Justin Worland which appeared in the August 3, 2020 edition of *Time Magazine*. <https://time.com/5870485/isabel-wilkerson-caste/>

With just a day to complete interviews for a piece she was writing for the New York Times, she had little time to lose. But the workings of the universe had other plans.

As she made her way quickly through the terminal, a pair of strangers caught up to her and began hounding her with questions.

What were her plans? Where did she live? Why was she there?

After following her to a rental-car shuttle they finally revealed themselves: they were U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents. “We’ll allow you to board, but we will be riding with you,” they told her.

Flustered, Isabel needed to gain her composure, so she decided to do what reporters do: She took out her pen and notebook and started writing notes on the agents and everything that had happened.

When the shuttle arrived at the rental car lot, the agents looked up from their seats and said, “Have a nice day,” and it was over just like that.

“These things are so much a regular feature of life for people of color in this country and for African Americans in particular,” says Wilkerson.

Through her eyes and her prose we see the encounter for what it is: both ordinary and outrageous, both personal and a universal condemnation of the society we’ve built.

“The quiet mundanity of that terror has never left me,” she writes, “the scars outliving the cut.”

When it comes to determining WHO’S IN and WHO’S OUT; WHO’S ON THE RIGHT SIDE and WHO’S ON THE WRONG SIDE in America, race and caste play outsized roles.

Returning to our gospel story, we see that the pat on the back John seems to want for trying to STOP the stranger from doing ministry in Jesus’ name is NOT what he gets.

DO NOT STOP HIM, says Jesus, FOR WHOEVER ISN’T AGAINST US IS FOR US.

Friends, GOD IS WORKING ALL OVER THE PLACE IN WAYS WE AREN’T PRIVY TO, and when we stumble upon one of them our job is not to oppose it—but to give thanks!

In this moment, in these times, being aware of how suspicion and profiling contort our understanding of what God is up to in the world and limit our ability to join in God’s work is crucial to the life of our church.

Being apprenticed to Christ means acknowledging the forces within ourselves and within our society that would keep us blind to age-old patterns for excluding others from the gifts of the gospel.

Being apprenticed to Christ, to his FRAMING STORY, means BEING PREPARED TO BE SURPRISED; BEING OPEN to discovering how GOD is at work in places and among people whom we might least suspect.

Today Jesus teaches us something about letting God be God: Don't shut the door.

Be open to new faces and methods where God's work is being done; where people are being freed from the forces that bind their hearts and cripple their lives.

Trust Jesus when he says:

Whoever gives a cup of water will by no means lose the reward.

Trust Jesus when he says:

I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.

Trust Jesus when he says:

This is my body, this is my blood, given for you and for all, for forgiveness, for healing, for life.

Amen.