

God's Economy

Matthew 20:1-16

Whitefish UMC

September 21, 2008

- † In a *New Yorker* cartoon by Mick Stevens, five very glum-faced people are sitting around a conference table in an office building. One says to the others, “Before each of you, you will find a bitter pill and a glass of water.”
- † I don't know about you, but these days I'm having trouble deciding which problem I ought to be worrying about more: the economy, the retirement funds of my parents and my own, the pervasiveness of human suffering, or politics.
- † There are more than enough bitter pills to go around, thank you very much. I've had more than enough of bad medical news from dear friends, of sadness from children who mourn a beloved friend. And I suspect you have had enough, too.
- † If we choose to, we can find a lot to complain about. And so today's parable of the workers in the vineyard is fitting for us to ponder.
- † God, says Jesus is like a farmer who had grapes to harvest. He goes to town at dawn, contracts with some workers; they go to work, agreeing to work for the usual daily wage.
- † At midmorning, he's back in town and hires more workers, and they go to work. At noon, he's back again, saying, “Come to work for me, I'll pay you what's right.” Then at three in the afternoon, he's back again.

- † You can imagine the kind of people who are left at the Unemployment Office by that time of day—the people nobody else wants. But he invites them anyway, and they go to work.
- † One hour before quitting time, he’s back one more time. No boss in his right mind would want the folks who have been passed over by everybody else, who’ve been hanging around all day, except this boss.
- † At quitting time, the boss calls everybody in and pays everybody the same wage, even if they have only worked an hour. Of course, all hell breaks loose. The injustice of it all! What about those of us who worked all day! We’re being treated just like those guys who showed up just before quitting time? It just isn’t right!
- † Talk about a bitter pill. So the workers who began the day in the vineyard demand an audience with the farmer. “You have not been fair,” they say. “We have worked all day and some of these people have only worked an hour and you have paid us just the same.”
- † Now the farmer makes two very interesting responses. First he says, “Look, I have done nothing unjust. You and I agreed on what I would pay you at 6:00 a.m., and I have done that—I have fulfilled my promise.”
- † The second thing he says is: “Am I not free to do with what I have as I want, or are you begrudging me my generosity?” And this second statement is of course the key to the parable.
- † For the parable is not so much about what is just as it is about the generosity of the farmer God. We go all the way back to the story of Creation to find that God began to create the universe not to get something for God’s self but to give something of God’s own self. As Father John Claypool says, “...bottomless generosity is the source out

- of which all creation comes, and because of generosity, the truth is none of us, if we look deeply into our lives, can claim that we have earned this existence of ours by our own efforts.
- † Each one of us was given life as a gift. If you look profoundly enough, birth is windfall, is coming into the possession of something that is not ours by deserving, but something that has been given to us. If we stay in touch with that primal grace that marks the beginning of all our lives, then the truth is we have reasons to be grateful no matter what our particular circumstances.
 - † We no longer think in terms of justice because life is not fair, because it is rooted in grace. Rather we have reason to believe that the sheer wonder of aliveness is an unending source of joy and of gratitude.”
 - † Wouldn't it be fantastic if we could live in “The sheer wonder of aliveness...as an unending source of joy and of gratitude”? Yes, it would. But to live that way, seems, well fantastic—as in only in fantasy, not reality.
 - † In these past few weeks of mostly bad news, I have tried to find reasons all the days long to be grateful. And most days, I can find at least a few. For me they have been the beauty of our church hike on the Autumn Creek trail, the thoughtfulness of friends, a swim in the lake, the binding together of our youth in the midst of tragedy.
 - † But it has also been oh so easy to slip into an attitude of despair and anger at the injustice of all that is going on in the lives of some dear friends in our church and in the world at large. Don't get me wrong, there is a place for anger at injustice and suffering. Jesus taught us that.

- † But when we let ourselves give in to residing in the unfairness of life, we resign our lives to misery and resentment. Comparing our lives to others leads us to always want more, to grasp instead of give, to count the cost of everything rather than give ourselves away extravagantly.
- † When I first entered the ordained ministry, a mentor recommended the book *Diary of a Country Priest*, by George Bernanos. He warned me that some people found it boring and unrealistic, but that he thought how potential pastors reacted to it would tell a lot about whether they would make good pastors.
- † Published in France in 1936, the book tells the story of a young man, raised in poverty, who has become a priest and is assigned his first parish in northern France. Although he does his best under difficult circumstances, the young priest endures gossip, torment, and physical illness that result in deep suffering and a sense of failure.
- † Nevertheless, he keeps his commitment to visit every family, teach catechism class to children who mock him, bury the dead, and pray for the sick. His life is mundane, mirroring the life of his little village. It's full of disappointment but also of moments of insight and connection to God.
- † A week ago, I discovered that a film had been made of the book in 1951, and that it was considered a classic of French filmmaking. So Tom and I rented it from Netflix and watched in this week. Although it could have been depressing, we both found it to be strangely inspiring.
- † The director, Robert Bresson, chose a non-actor to play the priest, who endures suffering from his illness, diagnosed later in the film as stomach cancer, and the pettiness and intolerance he witnesses all

- around him. Because of his illness, the priest can only eat bread soaked in wine—cheap wine is all he can afford—and so the villagers think he is a drunk.
- † But the priest resolves to carry out the grace of his office, and in the film’s greatest scene, the priest visits the local countess, whose daughter is despondent and filled with resentment toward her parents. He finds the countess full of anger and grief over the death of her little son. She hates God as a result.
 - † Although she rejects him at first, the priest continues to talk with the wounded mother and urge her to let go of her anger and grief for the sake of her daughter and her self.
 - † In the film, a groundskeeper rakes leaves outside the countess’s window throughout the scene, and the sound of the dead leaves being gathered in as the Countess at last releases her grief and hatred is a powerful metaphor.
 - † But even this act of kindness from the priest, an instrument of God’s grace, results in disaster. The countess dies in her sleep that very night and the priest is held responsible.
 - † As the priest’s health deteriorates, he has every reason to despair. And yet even as he goes to a former colleague, who is now an apothecary, he finds new insight into his life and vocation. He dies in the apothecary’s house, speaking two famous lines (one of them Martin Scorsese’s favorite in all of film): “God is not a torturer,” and finally, “All is grace.”
 - † Let’s face it, the world through which we all wander would tell us otherwise, if we let it. How can it be that grace abounds? The economy is in shambles, good people get sick and die, young people

die in tragic accidents, war and terrorism claim innocent victims, and our politics are full of attack ads that really work.

- † Yes, we can, like the workers in the vineyard who showed up at 6:00 a.m. and worked hard all day for the same wage as those who only worked an hour, focus on the unfairness and injustice of it all.
- † But we can also choose to view our lives as a gift and our birth as a windfall. Then we can begin to be generous with our lives as God has been generous with God's life in continuing to create our world.
- † There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm, and when the father died, they decided to keep their partnership.
- † So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season they would divide equally what they had together produced. Across the years, the older brother never married, stayed an old bachelor.
- † The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having an unusually bountiful harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, "My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of this harvest than I do, but I know he is too fair to renegotiate.
- † I know what I'll do. In the dead of night when he is already asleep, I'll take some of what I have put in my barn and I'll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children.

- † At the very same time he was thinking of this, the younger brother was thinking to himself, “God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn’t been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He’s much too fair. He’ll never renegotiate.
- † I know what I’ll do. In the dead of night when he is asleep, I’ll take some of what I’ve put in my barn and slip it over to his barn. And so one night when the harvest moon was full, as you may have guessed, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity.
- † The old rabbi said that though there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God weeping for joy because two of his children had gotten the point.
- † Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy. And because we are made in God’s image, the secret to our joy is being generous as well.
- † Nobody is saying that pain and suffering aren’t real. Nobody is saying that there aren’t more than enough of those bitter pills to go around. Complaining is okay now and then. It gets frustration and sadness off your chest and out of your heart.
- † But faith and trust are better. Praise and thanks are better. Generosity that comes from the gift of being alive is better.
- † Never forget to give thanks to God, who gives us God’s own self in Jesus Christ, that we might be healed, forgiven, liberated, and filled with light—even when we don’t deserve it.
- † This is God’s economy. And all is indeed grace. May we live because it is so.
- † Amen.

Sources:

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