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September 24, 2017

The Jolting Generosity of God

The main subject of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God, or Reign of God. And the main way he taught about it was in parables. Stories draw us in. As one has said, "The shortest distance between two people is a story."

Picture our world as one circle and the Kingdom of God as another. Jesus said that by the grace of God the circles were beginning to overlap. The parables picture the area when they overlap.

Parable means literally "to throw alongside." Parables are stories which throw the Kingdom of God alongside our everyday world so we might imagine what the kingdom of God is like and imagine how our lives might be part of it.

Over and over again Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like, is like, is like, and he'd tell a story about a father welcoming home a lost son, of a Samaritan risking life and limb to save the life of Jew, of a farmer

discovering a treasure chest in a field, of mustard seeds growing into giant trees, of joyous wedding feasts.

The strategy of parables was often like this: Jesus would tell a story which invited the hearer into our familiar, work-a-day world. We would climb inside the story. Then would come a surprise that turns this world, our world, upside down. So with today's parable.

I

A landowner went out early to hire laborers for his vineyard. Early meant around 6 a.m. He offered to pay them a denarius, a fair daily wage for that day. They agreed and went to work.

Then he went out at 9 a.m. and said to some more laborers, "Come work in my vineyard; I will pay you what is right" or just. No specified amount, just "what is right."

Going out at 12 noon and 3 p.m. he did the same and gathered more workers. Then at 5 p.m. he said to a group of workers: "Why do you stand by idle?" They replied "No one has come to hire us." They have now, the landowner said, and hired them to work what was left of the day.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard sent his steward to pay the workers, beginning with those hired last.

When those hired last came the steward gave them a whole denarius- what the owner had promised those hired at 6a.m. When those hired first came to be paid, they thought they'd be paid more, but they received what they'd agreed to, one denarius. No Fair! They grumbled, "Those workers hired last worked an hour and we've labored all day in the scorching sun." No Fair!

Then the owner said, "Friend, I did you no wrong. Did you not agree with the usual daily wage? Take your pay and go. I chose to give those last hired what I gave to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose to do with what belongs to me?" I think it important to note, a fair day's wage for a full day's work is itself a grace.

Then he added the clincher. "Is your eye evil because I am good?" Do you begrudge me my generosity?

II

I think the story upsets our fairness meter. We are born with this gizmo inside called a fairness meter, a most delicate instrument. When the slightest unfairness happens the alarms go off. Then *we* go off.

I knew some parents who when two of the children had a piece of cake to divide had this rule: one cut the cake and the other got to choose which half he/she wanted. That led to some very careful cutting and measuring.

Henry Ford once said, “What’s good for religion is good for business. What’s good for business is good for religion.” He would not like this parable very much. It would wreak havoc on the assembly line. What does this parable do to capitalism, and to the good ol’ Protestant work ethic?

Jesus lived this parable by bringing the grace of the kingdom to outcasts, sinners, tax-collectors and prostitutes. He might have told this parable to answer the grumbling of the righteous over his befriending of such folk. In the minds of the righteous, latecomers like these didn’t deserve the kingdom of God.

Matthew may have applied the parable to answer the grumbling of good Jewish Christians over the reception of the Gentiles into the church. These latecomers didn't deserve to be here.

What about death-bed conversions? Is it fair for a person who lived not so good a life to slip into heaven with a last minute conversion? In the early years of Christianity, some Christians waited to be baptized until their death came near. Why? Because if baptism forgave all previous sin they didn't want to risk having some post-baptismal sins on their record.

So the righteous grumbled against Jesus' gospel of grace as those first hired grumbled against the land owner.

Jesus concluded the parable with the familiar words: "For the last will be first and the first will be last." Jesus once said to flabbergasted righteous folk, "Sinners and prostitutes will go into the kingdom before you!"

It's like Jesus' first beatitude: "Blessed are the destitute in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And this one: "Blessed are the famished for justice and righteousness; for they will be filled."

Flannery O'Connor once said, "We accept grace the quickest where we have the least."

III

On the human plane the parable is a warning against envy. "Is your eye evil because I am good?" The biblical expression for envy was to have an evil eye.

Envy was chosen early to be one of the seven deadly sins. Pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. The Latin word for envy was *invidia*, to look maliciously upon. Envy is the sin of an evil eye. Dante pictured those guilty of envy in purgatory as having their eyes sewn shut with iron thread.

A partner gets a promotion, and your eyes turn evil. A beautiful woman walks into a room, and while men may gaze upon her with one of the other deadly sins, a woman finds her eyes turning evil with envy.

Frederick Buechner defined envy as "the consuming desire to have everyone as unsuccessful as you are." That's only part of it. *Envy is sorrow at another's success and joy over another's misfortune.* It infects us all. It perversely turns Paul's statement, "Rejoice with those who

rejoice and weep with those who weep” upside down. (Romans 12:15) We weep with those who rejoice, and rejoice with those who weep.

Aristotle said envy is worst among equals. So we have professional jealousy and sibling rivalry. King Saul didn't envy David's harp playing, but when David became a successful warrior and people began singing “Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands”, Saul's eyes turned evil with envy.

Nineteenth century preacher Joseph Parker wrote:

Beware of envy...it is relentless, it will plague your life, it will rob every flower of its perfume, it will ban the light out of every window of the house; your dinner today will be no refreshment to you.

What is uglier in the human spirit than this: Unhappiness at another's good fortune and joy at another's bad fortune.

I once was overtaken with envy over a preacher friend's growing acclaim as a preacher. His star was rising. My remedy was to pray for him more and more success. The stone of envy in my heart began to dissolve.

Perhaps at its heart envy is a grumbling against God, and here we return to the parable.

The workers grumble about the generosity of the landowner. What we see in the parable is the jolting generosity of God.

When Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, he did so because this was our way of imitating God who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike. Here we see the impartial goodness of God to all people.

We live in a merit-based world: you get what you earn by your hard work. The kingdom of God is a grace-based world: you get what you get by the goodness of God. The kingdom of God is all grace. Your life is all grace. Who would want it different?

This parable gets under our skin, until we turn and see the sheer goodness of God for us and for all the world.

When you come to the end of your life and stand before the throne of God would you rather God be just or generous? Every minute of your daily life, would you rather God be just or generous?