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AMDG

Proper 20A, September 24, 2017

Well, today's parable shows a very clear violation of the Wages and Fair Labor Standards Act. However, this parable is not about labor relations. It's about God's extravagant love - freely given and available to all. A love, when experienced, unites us to God and one another, and inspires us to love in the same way.

When we hear parables like this, they stop us short, because they don't seem fair. We like things fair. And, that's a good thing, because fairness is a foundation of justice. It is justice, in the Biblical sense, that compels us to speak out when others are not treated fairly, it pushes us to strive for equality for others before the law. This sense of fairness is a necessary beginning in building God's Kingdom.

But, this sense of fairness can become ego-centric, driven not by what is right, but what seems fair in terms of our own wants and our own expectations. It feeds into our lesser nature, which is basically our own insecurity and lack of trust in God. In this warped sense of what's fair we pay less attention to the abundance we have been given by God and more on what we feel we lack, or even worse, on what others have that we do not. It blinds us to God's will in our lives. This lack of trust in God is what's behind resentment and animosity and induces us to lash out at those who we think might be getting the better of us. Driven by this gnawing sense of insecurity and deprivation, we compare ourselves over and against others, begrudging their good fortune because it wasn't our good fortune. We feel separated from God's loving-kindness and from each other, and fall into resentment and envy.

It reminds me of a scene from one of my favorite religious movies, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, when Willy Wonka shows them the machine that makes "Everlasting Gob-stoppers," a candy that you can suck and suck and it never gets smaller. (isn't that interesting metaphor for the kingdom of God!?) Anyway, after giving each of the children one, telling them never to show it to anyone, one selfish child, Veruca Salt, cries out, "Hey, she's got two. I want another one!"

Wonka responds, “Everybody has had one, and one is enough for anybody.”

Veruca is such an excellent example of what we are like when we lose trust in God and come from that place of scarcity. She’s has been given everything she’s ever wanted, and it isn’t enough. Like her, when we look at life from a place of scarcity, the thoughts that drive our actions are, “I don’t have enough, and if I don’t do something, I’ll be left empty-handed.” From this mindset we quickly begrudge anyone who might get more than us. These are first vineyard workers in our parable, who complained when they saw the last vineyard workers being treated generously.

In Jesus time, much like today, it was tough to be a day-laborer. No regular employment, having to stand in the town square hoping that someone with extra work would hire you - often many more laborers than available work. So if you were lucky, you'd get chosen to work a twelve-hour day, and at the end receive a day's wage that would provide enough food for your family for the next day. If you were unlucky however, you'd be passed over, possibly waiting all day, only to return empty-handed to face the disappointed looks of your family.

But in this parable, everyone is blessed. They’re all given what they needed - regardless of whether they’d been fortunate to be picked first or had to wait all day to be chosen. And, the first chosen, rather than feeling thankful to have found work for the day, feel cheated at not having received more. Rather than rejoicing that their co-workers -- who waited all day for the prospect of work and who can now return home able to feed their families - they can only begrudge them, perhaps even curse them, their good fortune. And rather than being grateful to the landowner who has given them an honest day's wage for an honest day's work, they can only protest resentfully.

When we look at our lives, do we count our blessings or our misfortunes? Do we live by gratitude or scarcity? I imagine we can all see a bit of both in ourselves.

We know when we come from that place of fear, we forget how blessed we are. Fear drives us to feelings of anxiety, envy, and resentment. But, in so many ways, Jesus tried to reassure us that we have nothing to fear, God is always with us, and wants us to trust in his lovingkindness.

Earlier in Matthew Jesus tells his followers not to worry about their lives - what they will eat, drink or wear - just like the birds of the air, and the flowers of the field, we are provided for. "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Yes we all understand this to varying degrees, in glimpses, or fits and starts throughout our lives. When we do get it, our response is to love in the same way as God, without measure. And we all know how gratifying it can be to be able to give from the mindset of blessing. There are those that get this so deeply that they build their lives around it. They know at the core of their beings that they have been blessed by God, and respond by extending that love to those who are needy. They rejoice when their neighbors are blessed with good fortune. While some may question who deserves what, and how much should be given, and who will do what, and will we be recognized for our gifts, they give. Without concern for fairness, or recognition; they see a need, and they want to fill it. For those who feel God's extravagant love in their own lives, it is gratifying to see that love extended to others.

Which brings me to social media - you were probably wondering how I was going to fit that in didn't you? I was going to offer a list of holy ways and not so holy ways of using social media. But, you don't need a list. You know, in your hearts, that like all tools and activities it can be used for good or for ill. It's not too hard to recognize when these tools are being used to extend God's love and mercy, and when they are being used to extend fear and resentment; when posts on Facebook and Twitter are meant to connect God's people or to divide them. Social media is only a mirror of our own spiritual state. When we are coming from a place of gratitude, confident in God's love and mercy, we see beauty, compassion, joy, and other manifestations of God's love everywhere, on Facebook and in one another. And, we feel compelled to seek out more and share more of the same. When we're coming from a place of scarcity, we approach the world with insecurity, mistrust, and despair; social media and all the world are filled with darkness, and we tend to gravitate toward the posts that affirm our mistrust and cynicism and sometimes fall to lesser angels and add to the darkness. I know when I'm not in the best of spiritual spaces, if I go on Facebook I skip over the inspirational posts and the posts of dancing cats, and hone in on the

complaining diatribes and angry expressions of fear and mistrust. I leave feeling empty and hopeless. When I'm coming from a place of gratitude, I notice posts that are affirming and life-giving and the many examples of people living out the Gospel in their lives. I feel compassion when I see posts that are sad or even angry, and can say a quiet prayer for those who are lost and suffering. (to be honest, though I always skip over the cute animal posts). Social media, like any media and any human tool is only as useful as the user.

The one thing that is a little different about electronic media and that we should be especially watchful of, is that it can enhance the illusion of separation from others, lulled into a sense of false security, our scared little egos can exercise all their self-righteous defensiveness and insecurity. God knows we don't need any help enhancing our sense of separation. But, social media can also enhance connection - at the family funeral I attended, a cousin told me that he'd reconciled with one of our family members who he'd been estranged from for many years through Facebook. And, this week I rejoiced that some of the survivors of the Mexico earthquake were rescued because they reached out using WhatsApp. The Holy Spirit will use any means to extend God's love and mercy in the world.

My brothers and sisters, we are Gods beloved. It is his good pleasure to give us the kingdom. God calls us **live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, to** recognize the abundant love showered upon us in Christ Jesus, and to be quick to rejoice and share that love with others. May we be quick to embrace that heavenly love, and to reject the fear and resentment that come from not recognizing our belovedness in God. Today's opening collect expresses this beautifully. Let us pray. - Grant us, Lord, **not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure;** through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.