

Unfair
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We just heard two parables, one about Jonah, and one told by Jesus. I am going to tell you another one, as a sort of counter-balance.

The rabbis told a tale 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 had found their working together so meaningful that 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 corporately produced. Across the years the elder brother never married; he stayed single. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a wonderful 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 his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I'll do. In the dead of the 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 time he was thinking those thoughts, 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 the night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn." And so one night when the moon was full, as you may have already guessed, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that 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, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well. Life is not fair. It's not fair because it's rooted in grace. How do we measure this kind of generosity?

As long as I am in storytelling mode, I want to tell another story, this time one from a film. In the 1990's comedic drama, Forrest Gump, the title character, is sent as a soldier to Viet Nam. He befriends another soldier named Bubba. Caught in an ambush in the jungle, Forrest runs to safety, only to realize that he has to turn back and find his friend and bring **him** out of danger. At great risk to himself, he runs back into the jungle, coming upon another wounded soldier. He picks him up, carries him to safety, and then goes back for Bubba. He does this five times, back and forth, back and forth, with gunshots and grenades and fire blossoming all around him. He cannot seem to leave anyone behind. How do we measure this kind of generosity?

By contrast, our stories from Scripture give us an ironic picture of human limitations. First, there's Jonah, famous for running away from God and into the belly of a fish. Our reading today takes up the story when he has finally fulfilled God's command to preach in the great city of Nineveh. His warning about God's judgment on the city produces almost instant results: the king orders a city-wide fast and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes (this includes all the animals, be the way) and a conversion

from their wicked and violent ways. And guess what? It works! God does not punish Nineveh, that great and wicked city.

Jonah, the perpetually cranky Jonah, does not see this as success. He is angry: angry at God for being gracious, “merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Even though Jonah got second chances to do what was right, he couldn’t stand it when other people got the same treatment. It wasn’t fair! To us, the readers, this seems comical and childish. Maybe even God was smiling: God asks twice, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Jonah says that he is angry enough to die. Such is the powerful resistance to God’s grace that springs up in the human heart.

The book of Jonah ends with a question mark: God’s question: “should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” So the story ends with a question, with Jonah still sitting in a fit of pique outside the city, waiting to see what will happen. We are left wrestling with God’s goodness, a force of good that refuses to condemn persons and animals. We wrestle with the goodness of a God who demands that we show grace to our enemies and friends and the innocent who are caught between. This insistence on goodness and mercy hounds us, like Jonah, into boats and onto seas and into fish and back onto land. We may try to escape this calling, but still we are confronted with a God who asks us to speak the truth of a generous grace to all people and all creation. How do we measure this kind of demanding generosity?

Jesus’ Parable of the Vineyard follows an exchange with his disciple Peter about eternal life. A rich young man had just been told to sell all his belongings, give the money to the poor, and follow. Though he is virtuous and religious, the young man can’t quite summon up that kind of generosity. Peter responds with a reminder that he and the other disciples have left everything behind to follow Jesus, just in case Jesus hasn’t noticed. ☺ So what’s his reward? His reward is a parable that’s hard to understand and hard to accept. The kingdom of heaven is like.... a landowner who goes into the marketplace 5 times in the course of a day to find day-laborers. Luckily, we do not read parables literally, because we would really wonder about this landowner. First of all, he doesn’t hire enough laborers at the beginning of the day. He pays the last workers first. He pays them all the same amount. And he curtly dismisses the natural grumbling of the exhausted workers who have suffered in the heat all day. Is this any way to run a business? But the Kingdom of Heaven is not a business. It is a state of mind and a way of living that makes no apparent sense. And the parable tells us something about our natural human resistance to heavenly business practices. It sets some choices in front of us.

The landowner seems so eager to gather more and more workers. He just can’t bear to leave anyone behind. This is the aspect of the story that brought Forrest Gump in the jungle to mind. Back and forth, back and forth, the landowner, God’s irrational grace, goes to the marketplace to scoop up all who remain behind. Even when they may not be very productive, even when no one else seems to want to hire them, even when they are forgotten or written off or useless, it turns out that God wants to include them. And not only include them in the work, but include them in the reward. When Jesus uses this rather absurd story of workers who work unequal amounts but receive the same pay, he seems to say with a smile, “Grace isn’t fair. Isn’t that wonderful?” How can we measure this kind of generosity?

So we are given choices. We can measure our worth and our rewards in ways that exclude or ways that include. We can look at others as competitors or coworkers. And we can reflect on our lives in gratitude or in disappointment. When we look at our lives, do we count our blessings or our misfortunes? Do we pay attention to the areas of riches in our lives or what we seem to lack? Do we

live by gratitude or envy? Can we see others through the lens of solidarity and compassion or do they just seem undeserving? I don't think we can be grateful and envious at the same time. We need to decide which brings us into the fullness of the Kingdom.

We might start with cultivating an awareness of our place in the network of human relationships. Albert Einstein said, "A hundred times a day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labors of other people, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the full measure I have received and am still receiving." Perhaps this is the humanist wording of grateful living. Two and a half thousand years ago, Lao Tze wrote:

*The way of Heaven,
Is it not like stretching a bow?
What is high up is pressed down,
What is low down is lifted up;
What has surplus is reduced,
What is deficient is supplemented.
The way of Heaven,
It reduces those who have surpluses,
To supplement those who are deficient.
The way of man is just not so:
It reduces those who are deficient,
To offer to those who have surpluses.
Who can offer his surpluses to the world?
Only a person of Tao.*

I like that question: who can offer his surpluses to the world? As children of the Creator, we recognized that immeasurable grace and generosity is the source out of which all creation comes. As Christians, we follow the lead of Jesus, who was supremely able to give of himself. We imitate as best we can, giving from our surpluses, realizing that none of us can claim to have earned existence by our own efforts. Each one of us was given life as a gift. A primal grace marks the beginning of all our lives, and continues to visit us at unexpected moments. Though we pursue justice as a way to save the most oppressed, we remember that life is rooted in grace.

What I see now in our stories from Scripture is the way that Jonah and the hard working laborers have cut themselves off from the riches God offers. They cannot understand a God who pursues them and each other soul over land and sea and city, in the marketplace and in the field, at dawn and at nine in the morning and at noon and at 3 and at 5...the endless search for humans who will respond. They cannot experience the joy of shared labor because they are preoccupied with counting insults and feeling slighted. And so they refuse the greatest gift: a shared experience of gratitude and grace.

I like the stories where God weeps tears of joy when two brothers find each other in acts of surreptitious giving. I like the stories where a soldier keeps going back into a dangerous jungle, again and again, because he can't leave his friend – or anyone else – behind. I like the stories where the king of a rich city puts on sackcloth and find forgiveness. I like the stories where the landowner scurries around finding every last unemployed worker. I like them because they give me hope that God will find me too, and find you, ready to go into the Kingdom Vineyard together. I think we'll be too busy working and telling stories together to be measuring God's grace.