

Exodus 16:2-15
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

A number of novels are written these days with the story beginning at the end. The rest of the book, then, fills in what you don't know, using flashbacks or cross-cutting along the timeline. A number of movies use this format as well. I find this a very intriguing form of story-telling.

We have a bit of that going on in today's gospel passage. It is a story complete unto itself – this account of a land-owner who hires workers five different times during the day and pays them all the same amount. It is a standalone story that inspires many different interpretations. But it has a greater depth of significance when you go to the end of the story, which came first. It came one chapter earlier in Matthew 19.

There.....a rich young man wants to know what it will take to be saved. Give up all your wealth, says Jesus. The kid declines to do so.....which prompts a comment from Jesus that shocks everyone. He says it's so hard for the rich to enter God's Kingdom.

The disciples are dumbstruck! This is as ridiculous as thinking that Bill Gates, Donald Trump and Oprah Winfrey could all go broke. Unimaginable.....that it could be difficult for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God.

The conventional wisdom of the day said that wealthy people got that way because of God's favor. Wealth was like God's special seal of approval. The rich in ancient Jewish times were regarded as the most blest by God for being the best. They were the best at following religious law; at observing all the rituals; at maintaining a high degree of personal purity. And along comes Jesus saying that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich human to enter the kingdom of God.¹

Who then can be saved, the disciples ask, despondently. If the best among us aren't good enough.....well, then, there's just no hope. Right?

That's when Jesus tells his story of the land-owner with very odd compensation practices. The purpose of the story is to show the absolute irrelevance of money to God. Even more: It shows the absolute irrelevance of all that money *represents* when it comes to the ways of God.

You have to take a good, hard look at money to understand what Jesus is saying. You have to look at what it represents. It is so subtle and such an intrinsic part of how we think about ourselves and our world that we can miss the implications of what money means.

It means – on a purely practical level – that you have security, knowing that your finances are a hedge against going hungry or homeless. It means you're safe from the harsher conditions of life, like illness.....when you have money, you can afford care.

¹ (Mt. 19:24)

On a societal level, it means you're good. You have worth. You have accomplished something of worth to merit either receiving the money you have, or keeping hold of it if it was given to you. And on a psychological level – that place where we live with ourselves – it means you can be cocooned.....safe, carefree, isolated, insulated.....in your own good fortune. When you have money you can easily think that you don't need anyone or anything. You may not even need God!

It is this kind of thinking that Jesus is challenging. To do this, he gives us a story of exaggeration and hyperbole. [No land-owner would ever behave like this.] But the story does double-duty. As it works to shift our consciousness away from the systems of the world, it also shifts us to a different logic. It is the logic of grace and generosity.

This ridiculous, exaggerated system of generosity is how God's kingdom operates, Jesus is saying. You don't enter this kingdom by using the world's way of doing and thinking. You enter the kingdom of grace and generosity by becoming like it.

In order to become the people of grace and generosity, we have to learn a new way of being. For example, in our first reading about the people of Israel in the wilderness eating divinely provided food – bread in the morning and quail at night – we learn about reliance upon God. We learn about God as source. We discover that God as source can be trusted, with our very survival. We can actually expect God's provision new and fresh each day.

This makes me think about people who hesitate to pray for healing, believing that they ask too much of God. If anything, we all ask way too little! God's provisions of grace and generosity burst forth new and fresh each day. I am personally aware of several remarkable healings that have taken place in this parish recently. We asked, because we trust the provision of the One who is our Source.

We need to become people of grace and generosity in order to swim in; move about in; eat, drink and breathe grace and generosity. What does that look like? I'll tell you what it doesn't look like. It doesn't look like the laborer in the gospel story who said: "These last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the heat of the day."

To them the land-owner said, "I am doing you no wrong." I have paid you what we agreed. You are not being cheated. This reminds me of the brother of the Prodigal Son who, instead of rejoicing that his brother was alive, pouts and is jealous because their father gave him a party.

It is an ugly, twisted aspect of the human soul that feels violated just because another is getting something good and we are not. We cry "foul" and "unfair"! We bemoan the fact that life isn't fair. Thank God it isn't fair!

If life were completely, utterly fair, I would have to pay for a lot of things that I get for free. I did not have to build the road that I drove on to get here today. I did not pay for the several bridges I traversed. Yes, I pay taxes, but what a small amount of money I pay in comparison for all that I get. That's not fair. That's grace!

Anthony B. Robinson is a writer, teacher and ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. He has written:

"When our *only* measure is fairness; when we are pre-occupied with *our* just desserts, we lose touch with graciousness. True grace happens when those who feel they have been blessed and forgiven beyond what they have a right to expect respond in gratitude and generosity."²

When you rejoice that another has gotten something good that you didn't get – a promotion [that you wanted]; a baby [when you're undergoing fertility tests]; a big bonus: when you rejoice with that one.....you live into generosity of mind and spirit. Because in fact: We have all been given much more than we need. And we have all been forgiven much more than we deserve. We have all been blessed by grace and goodness.

Amen.

² Quoted in Synthesis for 14 Pentecost.