

## The Kingdom Is Like...

Perhaps the most common spin we put on today's parable is "it's never too late to get saved."

Whether you show up at the beginning of the day or the end, in your childhood or old age, God is always waiting for you, always ready for you.

We've all seen those movie scenes where the really bad guy is taking his last breaths and the priest hears his confession just at the last minute, ensuring that Mr Nogoodnick is now on the right side of God.

Which is all fine and dandy, as far as it goes.

But, truth be told, it doesn't go very far at all.

Because this take on the parable is all about a very private "me and you Jesus" sense of our relationship with the Creator of all things.

But Jesus wasn't fixated on this whole "personal relationship" idea.

That's a pretty modern invention.

Instead, Jesus seems intent on asking us to take a hard look at how we as a community treat each other, here and now.

Because the way we treat each other here apparently has a huge impact on how we'll feel about God's kingdom, in the age to come.

So this parable can really be seen from two points of view.

First, through the eyes of Jesus the itinerant Galilean prophet.

Second, through the eyes of the Cosmic Christ; the Word of God, in whom all things hold together.

It's a parable that's very down to earth, and it's a parable with cosmic implications.

Let's begin "down to earth."

Which begins with a warning.

A warning not to take these parables at face value.

Because, as Clarence Jordan says:

"A parable is a stick of dynamite, wrapped in a story." Paraphrased.

So what might this latest stick of dynamite be saying about how we run our economy today?

To be sure, we are a society that worships "me!"

Do you know how many people fall off cliffs each year — taking selfies?!

But we also worship "more" — as in, I can never have "enough!"

Just look at the pay rates for big bosses and the pay rates for the ordinary Joe and Jane.

For example, "chief executives at large companies make roughly \$278 for every \$1 a typical worker earns — that's up from a ratio of \$20-to-1 back in 1965 and a ratio of \$58-to-1 in 1989." CBS News, 8/14/19.

The consequences of this monstrous disparity sees a vast swath of the country now underemployed and underpaid, leading to envy and resentment, creating the breeding ground for the politics of fear and hate.

As the economic impact of this pandemic spreads, facing up to these gross inequities may have finally reached a flashpoint.

Yet sadly, those most impacted by this disparity usually focus not on the wealthy few who pad their own nest with unimaginable wealth, but on their fellow victims, who may be of a different ethnicity or religion or race.

Which is fine and dandy for the guys at the top (and they are almost always "guys"), since as long as we're fighting with each other, the bigwigs have nothing to fear.

So the first stick of dynamite Jesus lights today seems to be aimed directly at the rich and privileged folks of his day, and ours.

Rather than thinking of the landowner as a stand-in for God, what if he is simply a landowner, who has more than enough?

And he sees to it that everyone who works for him also has enough, whether they work all day or just for an hour.

What might our society look like if we insisted that everyone be provided with enough?

What might things look like if everyone is guaranteed a minimum livable income?

These, I think, may be questions Jesus asks us to wrestle with in this society of ours, that tends to see wealth as something the individual owns, and is entitled to, forgetting that God owns this world.

We so easily forget that we are merely trustees of the wealth that comes our way.

We're expected to use it for the benefit of others.

Because at the end of the day, it all belongs to God.

Jesus isn't asking us to wrestle with this because it's an interesting intellectual exercise or a lovely question of philosophy.

Listen to how the parable begins:

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a householder who went out early to hire laborers..."

He's telling us what God's kingdom is like.

And it's got nothing to do with fancy celestial condos or endless rounds of heavenly golf.

God's kingdom is like this fellow!

This generous fellow, going out to hire workers.

Meaning, if you want to live happily in God's kingdom, you gotta start thinking how they think in God's kingdom!

Just like last week's parable where the fellow forgiven a bazillion dollars ends up in the clink.

NOT because God put him there, but because he put **himself** there!

By rejecting generosity and insisting on bean counting, our poor fellow last week made a real mess of things.

If you can't learn to love this upside down way of God's hilarious grace, if you insist that beans must be counted and scores settled, that everyone gets their just desserts, well, where are you going to end up?

You'll end up like the first hired hands in today's parable, who stomp away from the generous master — steaming mad.

Why?

Because they refuse to see the world and their fellow human beings through the eyes of the compassionate landowner.

If we hope to one day live within the kingdom of God, we need to practice kingdom thinking!

And kingdom living!

Here and now!

Or when the time comes and the invitation is made, those who haven't made the shift will most likely take a peek inside heaven's gates — and see only hell.

For me, that's the "Jesus" take on today's parable.

But what about this parable from the "Cosmic Christ" point of view?

Every time I sit here and preach, I'm facing our gorgeous stained glass at the back of the church.

By serendipity, it's reflected in this plexiglas, so you can see it too!

It bears the symbols of all the world's major religions.

For some of us, it means we welcome people of all religious traditions to worship here.

For others, it means we're all invited to dive deeply into the mystery of Christ.

This Christ, in whom we live and move and have our being.

This Christ, who is the second person of the Trinity.

This Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

And when we go there, this beautiful stained glass reminds me that all faiths, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Taoist and so on, all theists and all atheists, all animists and Shamans and Wiccans; that all of creation is on the road to Christ, who came that the world might have life.

Who, when he is lifted up on the cross, drags the whole world to himself!

Seen cosmically, the parable today is about the folly of religious wars and fights and claims of superiority, as God, like the landowner, calls all humanity home.

If we are the beloved of God, it's not because of what we have done, it is because of what God does for us — in Christ.

Look into the night sky with its' trillions of stars, its' billions of galaxies, and wonder.

If this stunning magnificence is the Creator's gift — then what might the Creator be like?

Like nothing we can imagine.

Like nothing we can imagine.

Perhaps today, the good news is we can forget about **deserving** the good things God has in store for us.

We can forget about deciding who's early and who's late.

And smile at the pure graciousness of this loving God.

Who frees us.

Not because we are good.

But because God is good.

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