

Exodus 16:2- 15 & Matthew 20:1-16
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20A
September 24, 2023
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Two naturalists, Diane Ackerman and Roger Payne, had a conversation about whales in the late 1980's. Particularly, they were discussing the size of a whale's brain - many times larger than a human brain - and the idea of intelligence in this water-bound creature that sings and nurtures and coordinates and travels. After noting that human brains have brought us to dominance and simultaneously to the brink of destruction, Roger Payne comments on the non-invasive life of whales, not over-taxing the ecosystems they inhabit, and then he says this: "What we call [human] intelligence may be only a kind of vandalism, just mischief on a grand scale. It might not be the only form [a] mind can take, and it might have little to do with real wisdom."

One of the reliable ways that I can suss out whether or not I'm edging around the real wisdom of God is when it completely baffles me. Especially when I encounter stories that overwhelm in ways that are stunning for their beauty and goodness. As it turns out, we have two such stories today from across the centuries, two stories of generosity and abundance, of absurd love and lavish benevolence. And both times the recipients, and maybe we too, respond with bewilderment.

Anxious and worried and no doubt tired, the Israelites are making their slow sojourn away from Egypt and toward a promised but unknown future, and they, like children who don't quite grasp the scope of the journey, start complaining and asking questions. Are we there yet? I'm hungry. I wanna go home. Will we ever stop? What is there to eat? And when God rains down quail in the evening and a fine, flakey bread in the morning, they say, "what is it?" This is literally the translation of "manna," a word that means, "what's this stuff?" They are baffled and confused by the providence of God, not recognizing the gift at first for what it is: God's generosity made manifest. Daily bread given - with instructions to trust that more will come, that there's enough for all, and that hoarding will lead to foul results.

Similarly, in the parable Jesus tells of the vineyard workers, their daily wage - enough for daily bread - is handed out, and the response of those who worked all day to the landowner's decision to pay everyone enough is "why are you making them equal to us?" They are confused, bewildered, and quickly stingy, measuring their efforts and fatigue and finding the latecomers undeserving. It's not that their brains can't do the math; it's that they are quick to compute and plenty smart enough to figure out a pay scale which might have resulted in a bigger take for the early birds. But the owner of the vineyard has an entirely different economy in mind.

Theologians like to talk about "the economy of God," a translation of a phrase from the first book of Timothy that's probably closer to the "household of God." But either way, the idea is about the wisdom and intention of God for God's creation; it's about how things could be managed and ordered according to the larger understanding and the largesse of

God. God's economy or household is marked by how gifts are distributed and enjoyed by all comers. Of course, we've interpreted this all kinds of ways over time, but just taking these two stories in hand suggests that God in real wisdom means to create an economy of enough, of plenty. God is creating a community that is a clear alternative to the kingdoms of Egypt or Rome or any other system that relies on frameworks of domination and submission, rich and poor, haves and have-nots. This new world didn't make sense to the Israelites, "what is it?" and it didn't make sense to the grumbling characters in the parable, and it doesn't necessarily sit much better with us today. It's almost impossible to conjure a vision of a world of enough, of plenty, of unwarranted generosity and think, "yeah, that'll work, that makes sense."

Try for a minute. Try to release the urge to compete and to compare, to measure just what we have in front of us, and not what we have relative to what others are getting. Try to sit for a moment with the idea that if you have a meal today that you don't need to wonder about tomorrow's meal. We think we're pretty smart but our scavenging practices and mindsets of scarcity keep us from even imagining alternative economies where sharing and trusting and abundance are the givens in place of grabbing and stockpiling. It can feel naive and unsophisticated to picture a world where what you have is not a sign of your worth.

It might be as strange and bizarre as imagining that whales are actually the peak form of intelligence on the planet. That their economy, their way of living without destroying is a higher expression of what creation is capable of. This sounds crazy, I know, but we could use some practice in believing impossible things, in being baffled. What Jesus often does in his parables is tell us about the world we are part of only to render it completely unrecognizable. He told the crowds on the hillsides about familiar and known things and then made them wholly new, unfamiliar and unknown. Encountering the real wisdom of the story-teller Jesus, or recalling a tale about an economy of enough bread appearing to satiate a nation of people, brings us a place of amazement and disbelief. We ought to recapture the sense of being baffled in order to capture some of the essence of faith.

What God was up to as the Israelites hiked was creating an entirely new people, a new community formed in contrast with the world of Pharaoh, of slavery and dominance. And it didn't make sense; they looked at what God offered and said, "what is this?" What Jesus was up to while he told stories on the hillsides was also spinning a new vision of how we could be in the world, contrary to the dictates of Rome, of violence and hierarchies. The landowner said, "friend, I choose to give." And even the disciples were stumped as they tried to understand how differently they were being called to live.

The wisdom of God calls to us still, saying our economies don't have to be built on the stingy ideas of our small minds. The wisdom of God reminds us that "comparison is the thief of joy," and that what God desires for us is a life of deep joy and a sense of gratitude. The one prayer Jesus taught was about our daily bread: ours not mine, and daily not a pantry full of so much that it goes bad before I can eat it all. Over and over again from the early pages of scripture to the hillsides of Galilee to today, we might look at fluctuating stock portfolios or the migratory patterns of whales and be baffled, our minds fail us when we encounter real wisdom. We stumble at understanding, flummoxed by generosity, and grumble, instead of seeing that the world could be beautiful and generous. Perhaps, someday we'll be smart enough to accept the gifts and marvel at the real wisdom of God.