

The Death of Fairness
September 20, 2020
The Rev. Scott Walters

Roger was a psychologist and a parishioner in our parish back in Little Rock. And one Sunday he brought me a document he thought I might find interesting. It was his report on a candidate for ordination from years before, which he'd found in some files he was cleaning out.

Lots of you will have taken tests like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, and you may swear by its descriptive and prescriptive powers. You more mystical, Jungian types will say the MBTI is bunk and insist that the Enneagram is the way to true enlightenment. Roger's report was on something called the Hogan Development Survey, which had raised a couple of bright red flags for the candidate in question. It seems this person was in the 5th percentile in the "Dutiful" category and in the 95th percentile in one called "Mischievous." Roger knew me well. I loved just hearing there was a measurement for mischievousness somewhere out there in the world.

The report went on to say that scoring so abysmally with regards to dutifulness might be a problem for someone who would have to promise to obey his bishop. And to be more mischievous than 95% of other survey takers? Well. This would be one to watch. But, like any good interpreter of data, Roger considered other factors. He noted that there was no series of failed relationships or job changes or run ins with the law, which might have confirmed that this un-dutiful, mischievous person had deep set issues with authority. He also noted that other measures indicated the candidate was pretty sensitive to social cues (i.e. he cared what other people thought) which seemed to be keeping him pretty well in line.

I found this fascinating, just as Roger thought I would. And what he explained more succinctly in the report than I am in this sermon was this: we need to care about rules, or we need to care about what other people think if we're to function in human communities. One or the other needs to tie us to each other.

A person can care relatively little about rules, and she can still get along ok if she's cued in to what people around her think is fitting or beautiful or clever. Or, one can be dutiful, a dependable rule follower instead of an inveterate rule-questioner, and even if you don't give a fig what other people think, you can also get along fairly well with other humans. But if you don't care about rules *or* social cues...well, then you're a sociopath and maybe you shouldn't be a priest, among a long list of other things.

Ok, maybe you've guessed that the report Roger handed me that day was my own. I think it's safe to tell you this, since after three years at Calvary it's clear enough that this graying, 53-year-old dad in spectacles and khaki pants is about the blandest mischievous person you've ever met. In his summary paragraph, Roger said that after analyzing the results, he decided to take the test himself and his scores were almost identical to mine. Which is probably why Roger and I got on so well and may be why I got to keep moving through the ordination process at all.

Have you ever thought about the guard rails we humans need to keep us in relationship with one another? Free ourselves from rules and social cues and we're on our own in the saddest of ways. We're disconnected, alone, and probably destructive in large ways or small.

But here's the problem the Hogan Survey doesn't address. These ties are not ultimately sufficient either. In fact, Jesus says that if our identity is based entirely on rules or on the opinions of others, we're beating another path to a lonely, self-made hell.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard may be one of Jesus's clearest and most immediately understood. I mean, it's not immediately taken to heart, but we understand it from the time we're children. The unfairness is over the top. That the slackers who show up for the last hour of work get the same pay as those who've been laboring all day long...? Really?! This is craziness, by the standards of the meritocracy we pretend to believe in.

It seems humans are born to compare our lives either to some eternal rule of fairness or to some other person's good or bad fortune. But what the parable makes uncomfortably clear is that the kingdom of heaven is a realm of neither rules nor fairness. It is a realm made entirely of gift and grace. Hell is what we build out of our obsessions with rules and comparisons of our lot with the lots of others. Which is a hard truth, since we seem to need at least some of such things to stay connected to each other.

The fuel this parable burns on is that everybody in it is perfectly happy until they find out what everyone else has been paid. And the vineyard owner seems to want them to uncover his complete lack of interest in fairness. He tells his manager explicitly that when the laborers are paid, to begin with the latecomers and then go on to the first. Let word get out that the last to arrive got a windfall and see what it tells us about those who got what they'd been promised. See what it does to the community of people who were laboring happily together just a moment ago.

As a bit of an aside, we might note that the currency in this parable is...well...currency. It's about money. Like a lot of the Bible is, actually.

In the early 1970s, way before you could google it, a businessman named Howard Dayton decided to count the Bible verses about money or possessions and he found 2,350. It changed his life. How many do you think there are on faith or prayer? About 500. Nearly 40% of Jesus's parables involve money. We've spiritualized the Bible and invented a private form of faith, even as we ignore the forces that are actually tearing our lives apart. It takes no imagination at all to feel the way knowledge of the different levels of pay makes its way from one laborer to another, resentment building, and how what was a community set to a common task splinters into a bunch of alienated, competing, unhappy individuals.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" says the vineyard owner. And all of us, at one time or another, must answer, "Yes. That is precisely the source of our envy. Your generosity, measured in these dollars we're trained to count out so carefully, is why we're miserable. Your grace to those people feels like a judgment against us. It's what stirs up judgment within us as well."

It can seem like some of Jesus's teachings are about grace and others are about judgment. But the potentially redeeming truth of this parable is that grace and judgment are actually sewn into a single, seamless garment called the kingdom of heaven. The difference is in the character of the one who puts it on, isn't it? The presence of grace can be what sets off judgment in our lives.

So, the question the parable puts to us is not whether we've received a lot of grace or a relative little. The question is what kind of training do our souls need if we're to become people who can receive the gift of our lives for what it is, and not let our ancient need for rules and fairness split us apart into enemies and competitors for the vineyard owner's generosity.

I suspect different communities, in different times and places, might need to take on different practices to unlearn the ways of the world and live according to the kingdom of heaven. But surely they all involve practicing the art of receiving and practicing the art of letting things go. Letting things go like, well, money. Letting it go into the world more like it is the arbitrary gift of a capricious vineyard owner rather a hard earned possession we've gotten for ourselves fair and square and which establishes how we're to be thought of by others in the race for more.

I think I saw a small but lovely instance of this letting go recently in a different way. The vestry wants to give away the park on our block to our neighborhood more beautifully and more fully. They want to renovate it in a way that makes a safe and open setting for strangers to enjoy, but also for us to inhabit in new ways as the coronavirus makes outdoor spaces more essential. It's a small thing that's maybe not so small. I can see us using that space for an even more humane and hospitable Community Breakfast setting each Sunday, and worshiping out there on Sunday nights, and eating out there together on Wednesdays. And all these practices could go to work on our hearts, reminding us that the abundant life of the kingdom never arises from protecting what we think is rightfully ours. We see the kingdom when we find ways to relearn that we are all gifted workers in the very same vineyard... When we find ways to put our lives back together by giving them away in a world that's been built to keep us apart.

And the art of receiving? Well, for this Christian community it begins with the practice we've been separated from for six months now. The mending of our separated, competitive, resentful and lonely hearts begins in the practice of holding out our hands together, over and over again, to receive the gifts of God for

the people of God. It is eucharist that trains us in the art of receiving our lives and the lives around us as gifts. It is eucharist that trains us in the ways of grace as we practice reassembling this small corner of a world that is still coming apart in all the ways Jesus described.

We learn the ways of the kingdom of heaven as we practice the art of receiving and the art of letting go. So that maybe one day, to the vineyard owner's question, "Are you envious because I am generous?" a eucharistic people will come to answer, "Yes. But we are starved for another way of being. Deliver us from our obsessions with fairness and status and anything but grace. Teach us to receive our lives from your hand, so we can turn back to your beloved vineyard and let what we've been given go. We've at least begun to see that your kingdom will not come to us any other way."