

God Is Good...All the Time

Matthew 20:1-16

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I met a guy when I went back to seminary in Austin to do my studies. He had retired from the military, become a pastor, and now we were both students together. We both got up earlier than anyone else, about 5 am. So we started to go together to get a cup of coffee. We had been doing that for a while, and as we would walk we would talk and before we knew it a very special bond had formed. One morning at 5 am Jim came out of his room and we started out to get a cup of coffee. I said to him, "Where do you want to go to get coffee today?" I'll never forget what he said next. "It's not about the coffee."

It took me a while to figure out what an incredibly kind thing he was saying. He wasn't up at 5 am because of where we would get coffee. He didn't really care if it was from one of the "gourmet" coffee shops or the stuff that makes your hair stand on end at the 7-Eleven. He said, "It's not about the coffee." It was about the friendship. That's why Jim was there at 5 am.

Can you imagine how that made me feel? Someone was just glad to be with me. Someone was glad to spend time with me. With that one statement, my friend Jim gave me a place of belonging. It's not about the coffee. With that one statement, Jim gave me a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven.

The world we live in does a pretty good job of telling us it is about the coffee. Or the clothes we wear. Or the house we live in. Or the job we have. Or whether we are good in sports or drama or school. We belong because of something we have to offer, something that makes us successful, something we can hold up and say, "Here is proof that I belong. Here is proof that I am valuable." Sometimes a person speaks sense into all of that nonsense. One morning Jim said to me, "It's not about the coffee." Jim told me I belonged.

Today Jesus speaks a word of sense into all the nonsense. Jesus tells us the world is about people who are first and people who are last and people who get measured and fit into slots at all points in between. And then he tells us in the kingdom of heaven everything will be turned upside down. The first will be last and the last will be first. And God's generous love will be poured out lavishly and abundantly upon all his children.

What an incredible parable. Some workers start early in the day and some don't get the word until the very last minute. The pecking order is clear. The ones most deserving are obvious. The last, you can tell them just because there is no dirt under their nails and no sweat on their brow. This is easy. These ones are more worthy of reward, and these at the end.... This is a no brainer. And then Jesus turns everything on its head. Those hired last, who worked least, are treated just like those who started first and worked the longest. He covers every single worker with generosity. Every single person, from the first to the last, receives the gift of belonging. That's just how God is.

But the parable reveals something unsettling. The parable reveals something disturbing. The parable reveals something that doesn't fit with the kingdom of heaven. When God turns everything upside down...when God gives generously to the first and the last...when God blesses all with his kindness and compassion...those who were first, those who started earliest, those who worked longest, feel like they are treated unfairly. They grumble. They complain. They complain that everyone is treated as equals. They complain because they believe they deserve more. They don't seem to mind that everyone belongs, that everyone has a place, that everyone receives from God's generous hand. They just want to be sure they get a little more notice, that they belong a little more, that they get recognition for having worked longer and harder. And before we know it, the kingdom is no different than the world. There are those who are first and those who are last and those who are in and those who are out and those who belong...and those who "really" belong.

I want to live in a world where it is not about the coffee. That is the world Jesus holds up, a kingdom where people belong not because of what they do or what the world says they are worth. People belong to one another because all people belong to God, to the God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, the God who is good to all. But if we want to live in a world of belonging, a world that is not about the coffee, then we have to recognize that at times it will seem unfair. The last will be first, and the first will be last. That's just the way it is in the kingdom.

This whole parable grows out a question Peter asks Jesus. Peter watched a rich young man walk away from Jesus. The rich young man wanted to follow Jesus but he was not willing to sell his possessions and give them all to the poor. So with sadness the rich young man walked away. Peter watched this and then he asked Jesus, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you. What then will be there be for us?" That is such an honest question. Lord, you called us from our boats and our nets and our homes and our families. We followed you. We were the first ones you called. We have left everything to follow you. We went all in. We risked it all. We

have gone out when you sent us. We didn't take a bag or an extra tunic or sandals or a staff. We just went out in your name. Sometimes we were welcomed and other times the door was shut in our face. We went out even though you told us we would face persecution and hardship and trial and tribulation. Lord, we have left everything to follow you. What will there be for us?

When I read what Jesus told Peter in answer to his question, it sort of caught me by surprise. I thought he might rebuke him for such a question. Really, Peter is asking, "What's in it for us? What's in it for me?" But Jesus doesn't offer a stinging rebuke. Instead he gives Peter an answer that is almost too good to be true. "Peter, do you want to know what's in it for you? Then listen. Listen carefully. When I take my place in heaven and sit on my glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:27-29)

Jesus tells Peter heaven is for real. And it is better than you could hope for.

Whatever you left for my sake, you will receive a hundred times in heaven. Lord, we left it all for you. We went to work first. We have been at it longest. Will you be fair to us? Oh yes, I'll be fair. I'll be more than fair.

Friends, if you have been at it a while, if you have been out in the field, or on the committee, or making the coffee, teaching the class, singing in the choir, ushering and collecting the offering, changing the light bulb, feeding the poor, visiting the sick, caring for your loved one, and at some point you get a little discouraged, a little bit down, a little frustrated, a little tired, you might find yourself asking the question Peter asked. "What's in it for me?" God will you be fair? According to Jesus, he will be more than fair. Thrones and houses and land and a hundred times as much as anything you gave or sacrificed. God is good, all the time. He will be fair. More than fair, he will be generous.

And this fair God, this generous God, his will is to be generous to others, to all, to the first and to the last. That type of generosity marks the kingdom of heaven. The parable that follows Peter's question, "What's in it for us?" is a parable that invites us to celebrate God's generosity. It is a parable that invites us to rejoice in God's generosity. It is a parable that invites us to practice generous love with others, with all, particularly those who are the least, the last, and the lost. It is a parable that challenges us to move beyond the question, "What's in it for me?"

Growing up in our small town in California, our back yard was pretty big, and there were some 20 walnut trees. Every fall, those 20 walnut trees would drop their walnuts on the ground. My dad would look at me, and he would look at those walnuts on the ground, and he would say, “Wayne, we need to get those walnuts picked up and bagged so we can go sell them.” Every fall, when those walnuts would be on the ground and my dad would tell me I needed to pick them up, can you guess the question I would ask my dad? “What’s in it for me?”

When I was small, maybe five years old, he gave me an equally small coffee can. Every time I filled that small coffee can with walnuts my dad gave me 10 cents. A few years later the walnuts were on the ground and my dad said we needed those walnuts picked up. “What’s in it for me?” That year he gave me a big bucket, and filling that bucket earned me 25 cents, a shiny quarter.

One year my dad brought out this gadget, a long pole with a little hook on the end, and he said, “Here, now you can use this pole to shake the trees and get all the walnuts down easier.” Another year when he needed me to pick up the walnuts, he gave me a title. I was sixteen or seventeen now. I had been at it quite a few years. He told me I got to be the manager of the Eberly walnut fields. Every year the walnuts would fall to the ground. Every year my dad would call my name. Every year I would ask, “What’s in it for me?”

Finally I grew up and moved away. The trees grew old and my dad cut them down. My dad grew old, got sick, and he died.

Call me crazy, but every fall, I think back on those walnut trees. I think back on my dad. I’ve changed so much since those days. I’ve changed so much since those days when I asked my dad, “What’s in it for me?” What I didn’t realize then, what I wasn’t aware of then, what I missed back then because I was so focused on my buckets and my sore back and my stained fingers and the heat and the sweat, what I didn’t realize then is what really made the job meaningful. What really made it meaningful is that I was working for my dad.

Now, today, 35 or 40 years later, if I saw an ad...Walnut picker needed, Central California farming community, back yard with 20 walnut trees, high school math teacher needs walnut picker to shake the trees, strip the husks, and harvest all the walnuts.

I'd pay my way to get there, I would rush to grab the bucket, I would throw myself into the job with abandon, with joy, with complete happiness, I would work dawn to dusk, and if my back hurt I would stretch and smile....How much would he have to pay me? How much would my father have to pay me? How much would I want to make? How much would be fair? What would be in it for me?

Those questions would not even matter. What would matter is that I was with my dad. I love my father and if I could have just one day to work in his field, it would be the greatest privilege, the greatest honor, the greatest joy. Just to be working in his fields would be my heart's desire.

Jesus calls us to work in his field. The great miracle is that there might come a day when we no longer ask, "What's in it for me?" The day might come when we realize he is God's beloved Son who came to take away the sin of the world. The day might come when we realize he gave his life for me...for you...for us...for all of us...for each and every one of us. The day might arrive when we become so convinced Jesus is alive, so convinced he is Lord of heaven and earth, so convinced he is the Lord of every single life, so sure he is the Lord of my life, and that he loves me. The day might come when we move beyond the question, "What's in it for me?"

Maybe someday we will say,

"It's not about the coffee."

It's not about the reward.

It's not about what's in it for me.

It's not about being first or last or higher or lower.

It's not about any of that.

It is all about being with Jesus. It is all about serving Jesus. It is all about loving Jesus.

Maybe some day.

Maybe some day.

Maybe that day is today.