

-Game of Monopoly. I just played this game again after not playing it for a good couple of years with my cousins in Minnesota and it was epic. However, I quickly found out the competitiveness of Carl, my cousin, and Tom, husband to my other cousin (whom some of you have met) Kirsten. Carl and Tom were sly bargainers and instantly began negotiating with one another and the other players. I soon found out, after confidently landing on two utilities and two railroads and feeling like I had a chance, that trading and deals can get you on top quite quickly. Soon, Tom and Carl both had immense piles of cash leaving me thinking: "huh....I guess I shouldn't have made those deals which I thought were to my advantage." Of course, my cousin Kirsten and I were quickly mortgaging properties and struggling to stay alive while the two titans dueled. You can probably guess how the game ended. Monopoly, a game that came into popularity in 1935, demonstrates, how with a combination of luck and skill one can maximize their properties and income in order to put everyone else into bankruptcy.

-In many ways, one could say that the time during which Jesus walked the earth was similar to that of Parker Brother's Monopoly. Several small groups of people held great monopolies. If you were related to or friends with a ruler, you tended to do quite well. In fact, the Sadducees, the priests and rulers of the Temple in Jerusalem, were quite close to Herod, the ruling king of Israel with allegiances to Rome, even trying to go so far as taking a tax for Rome within the Temple compounds. The feudal system was also alive and well in ancient Israel and many families were enslaved by this monopoly structure for generations.

-With all of this as the background and context, you get this very interesting parable from Jesus usually referred to as the Parable of the Vineyard Workers. What was Jesus trying to say here, I wonder?

-My grandfather, "Grandpa Joe", who was a military chaplain mentioned to me once that this was one of the most challenging of Jesus' parables for him. "It's just not fair," I remember him reflecting on.

-I think he's right, it isn't fair. Not many of us would appreciate working out in the field all the day long, in temperatures probably close to 100 degrees (remember this is dessert), only to find someone else spending only 1 hour in the same field and making exactly the same wage. I know I would probably say "this is crap" or some other explicative under my breath just as many of you. But is this type of "fairness" Jesus' point?

-Karl Marx and his followers, yes the same Karl Marx who labeled religion as an "opiate for the masses", loved this story because it demonstrated Jesus "rebuking economic practices of his day as he foresaw a society of simple communism, ruled by God." Many pastors have preached this text, I think, in light of Marx's commentary as solely a critique on the American "pull-yourself-by-your-own-bootstraps" mentality.

-I do think Jesus is making a statement against the monopolistic system of his time, but it would be a mistake for us to treat this powerful parable as simply a political statement. That, I believe, cheapens it quite considerably.

-So what do we do with this hard piece of scripture? Let me share with you some of my wrestlings.... I think Grandpa Joe was right that there is a fairness component to this parable, but I think we can miss where and how that fairness is played out. Most Americans, including myself, automatically skip to siding with the “full-day”workers. They worked their buns off the whole day and didn’t see compensation for that. For us in the American context, this is unconscionable. But what we tend to forget is what it says in that text: “after agreeing with the laborers on the usual daily wage.” The landowner offered a fair daily wage and the laborers agreed to that wage. The landowner wasn’t skimping or cheating on payments, it was a fair daily wage that was agreed to.

-Furthermore, the landowner goes out again and tells the second group of workers “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” Then the landowner goes out again and hires more and more workers. This to me is the important pattern.

-To me, this isn’t a parable about workers getting cheated or strictly about communism. This is a parable about a landowner who hires. You want a job? You got one for a fair wage. "Why are you standing here idle all day?' [the landowner asks] They said to him, "Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard.”

-Think about this for a second. What does it mean for “everyone who comes is hired?” Think of how radical that is in our context. Maybe, the focus of this parable needs to be one of a generous God who, like the landowner, offers life and hope to everyone no matter who you are.

-So where does the fairness come down in this story? Should the workers working all day and getting paid the same be seen as unfair? Or, instead, should fairness be seen as the ones who couldn’t get to the landowner to be hired. Who were these workers? Were they on the social margins? Were they the drunks, prostitutes, sickly, or handicapped so no one wanted to have anything to do with them? Certainly, whomever they were, the landowner didn’t seem to care. They were hired anyway.

-The Missoula Interfaith Collaborative has started a new “social enterprise” called Missoula Works. The concept of this organization is very simple: anyone can work with the right support. So Missoula Works focuses on getting work for people just out of prison, or with a history of drug and alcohol abuse, or with mental and/or physical challenges. It’s spun off this crew called the “Get it Done” Crew which does anything from lawn care and landscaping to basic home improvement projects. Along with this, they provide special care, supervision, and support to their employees so everyone employed through their agency has a real chance at success. So if you have a project that they might be able to tackle, give them a call! (talk to me)

-Where does this parable end as a calling for us as Christians? Maybe our calling in our faith journey is to simply “get people to the vineyard owner.” If God, out of pure grace and love, will “hire anyone” then maybe all we need to do is get a person to show up. Maybe it means suggesting someone for Missoula Works to hire or call them up

because you have a job around the house. Maybe it means bringing someone to church with you or checking up on someone you haven't heard from lately.

-Anyone who comes and wants to work can has a job. What a glorious thing to celebrate: that is radical love and generosity. Thanks be to an incredible generous God who always has a "hiring sign" hung up outside. May we, in following the Holy Spirit, be able to encourage people to come check it out. Amen.

Questions for Children's Sermon:

1. What does Missoula Works do and how does it relate to Pastor Eric's sermon?
2. Have you ever called out for God's mercy before? Have you ever reminded God of God's promise to you before?

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3. What does Missoula Works do and how does it relate to Pastor Eric's sermon?
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Questions for Children's Sermon:

5. What does Missoula Works do and how does it relate to Pastor Eric's sermon?
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Questions for Children's Sermon:

7. What does Missoula Works do and how does it relate to Pastor Eric's sermon?
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Questions for Children's Sermon:

9. What does Missoula Works do and how does it relate to Pastor Eric's sermon?
10. Have you ever called out for God's mercy before? Have you ever reminded God of God's promise to you before?

Questions for Children's Sermon:

11. What does Missoula Works do and how does it relate to Pastor Eric's sermon?
12. Have you ever called out for God's mercy before? Have you ever reminded God of God's promise to you before?