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SUNDAY SERMON

THE PARABLE OF THE COMPASSIONATE MASTER by Jill Kayser

There's a style of storytelling I love to use with children. It's called Godly Play. It's a way of sharing and exploring scripture with children (and adults love it too) that aspires not to teach them about God, but help them discover **who God is.**

When sharing a parable the "Godly Play way", we introduce it like this:

"Our story today is in a box. It's a lovely box isn't it? It looks a bit like a gift. I wonder if there's a parable in this box. Parables are a gift to us. It's silver. Silver is precious. Parables are precious too. I wonder if there could be a parable in this box?" Let's open it and see. Oh it's hard to open. Parables can be hard to open too. But don't worry if you can't open or understand the parable, it will open up to you when you're ready."

I'm sure you'll agree that parables are indeed precious gifts to us and sometimes can be hard to open (or understand). The parable of the workers in the vineyard being no exception.

The owner of the vineyard heads to the village market bright and early to find workers for his vineyard. This is an ancient custom that apparently still persists in the Middle East.

He offers the workers a day's work at the fair and "going rate" of one denarius a day. The workers accept his proposal and head off to do their best day's work, probably in the hope that this will lead to more work the next day.

The vineyard owner returns to the marketplace at 9 am to find men still waiting eagerly to be chosen for work and offers them work promising them "fair" compensation.

By the time the vineyard owner returns to the market a third time at noon we start to suspect that something is amiss. I mean what kind of vineyard owner doesn't know how many workers he needs at the start of the day? His hiring of more workers at 3 pm and then again at 5 pm for a "fair" wage, alerts us to the twist to come.

When the vineyard owner instructs his manager to pay ALL the workers the same rate of one denarius and reverses the natural order by paying the last workers first we (and no doubt Jesus' audience), are surprised and even affronted at the injustice of it?

I mean surely if he was going to pay all his workers the same wage regardless of how long they worked, it would have been more fair even "right" to pay the workers employed at the beginning of the day first?

A strategy following the natural order of payment would have kept the peace. The first employed workers would have happily received their agreed wage and left for the day. The workers employed later that morning would of course have been delighted with their rate of pay. And the workers employed later, would have been thanking their lucky stars for such a generous employer.

Paying according to the natural order would have revealed the master as a magnanimous and compassionate employer without "rocking the boat," but the master wants those who worked all day to observe the grace he extends to the others regardless of how long they worked.

Jesus starts this parable like many others, with the words "*the kingdom of heaven is like....*" The phrase "kingdom of God" apparently appears 72 times in the New Testament and the phrase "kingdom of heaven" which is only used by the writer of Matthew's gospel appears 32 times (isn't Google marvellous?).

In the gospel of John a similar concept is described as "eternal life," or "life to the full."

This kingdom of God is at the heart of Jesus' teaching and ministry. "*Jesus did not preach about Himself, or about God, but about the Kingdom of God,*" says Dr. John Sobrino in his book, 'Christology at the Crossroads'.

The Kingdom of God he talks about is not just a promise or a dream, or someplace available in the afterlife, but something that is possible in this world here and now.

This wasn't a kingdom his listeners had ever heard of and it wasn't a kingdom his listeners had ever experienced. The world of the Jews in the first century was dominated by two very different kingdoms, namely a native domination system centred in the elites of Jerusalem and the temple; and the imperial domination system of Rome.

But Jesus' promoted an alternative kingdom – the "kingdom of God"- that challenged the domination systems of the day, including who was accepted by God.

This was a kingdom embodied by Jesus, a kingdom where everyone was accepted, an upside-down kingdom, where leaders are servants, where enemies are loved, where those who work least are paid the same as those who work most, and where the last is first and the first is last.

Jesus' goal, made clear in word and deed, day after day during his three years of public ministry, was not to constrict, but rather to expand the dimensions of who could be welcomed into this "kingdom" and this is what this parable focuses on.

It was a concept that no doubt challenged Jesus' listener whose dominant modus operandi was "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", but it's just as challenging for us two thousand years later.

Equal pay for equal work is a centuries old understanding of justice. It's a practise that subscribes to what Rob Bell, theologian, writer and teacher describes as conventional wisdom.

Conventional wisdom is the party line. It's a belief that $A + B = C$.

Wearing seat belts is conventional wisdom. Statistics tell us that if we wear seat belts we'll be safer.

In a world of conventional wisdom the harder we work the more we get paid and so we too, like the workers, feel slightly disarmed and unsettled by this story that doesn't follow the rules of conventional wisdom.

Our propensity to want conventional wisdom to prevail may cause us to empathise with the indignant workers, who despite working all day in the sun are paid the same as all the other workers.

But what is being demonstrated in this parable is what Rob Bell describes as 'gospel wisdom'. The "way of God" that is completely radical and contrary to the conventions of then and now.

The unfairness we (and most likely the vineyard workers) feel isn't rooted in lack, but in generosity.

This is not the cry of the underpaid, because no one is underpaid here.

This is a protest against the compassion, grace and generosity of the master for all.

The justly paid first workers cannot tolerate the master's compassion and grace. "You have made them equal to us" they complain. It seems that grace is not only amazing it is also infuriating.

Writer Kenneth Bailey suggests this parable should be renamed "The parable of the compassionate master", because the current title "the parable of the workers in the vineyard" focuses on the worker and not on the gracious, compassionate and generous master – a master who embodies the kingdom of God just like Jesus.

God's kingdom has come and continues to come. It has been planted in this world and is growing right in our midst. We can experience it, notice it in surprising places.

One Sunday after preaching at St Peter's Presbyterian Church in Tauranga I walked into town to catching a bus to Waihi. I was a little early arriving at the bus stop so found the doors of the bus closed. The bus was parked in the shade and there was an icy wind blowing down the street. I looked across the road and saw two street benches bathed in full sunlight. On one of these sat a homeless man. I crossed the street and plonked myself on the second bench saying to the homeless man "*This is the best place to be on a cold winters day.*" "Yes," he answered "*it's where I thaw out after a cold night.*" Just then a second homeless man approached and looked dubiously at me sitting on his bench. "*Would you like to share my bench?*" I asked, "*there's plenty of space for two.*" At that he sat down and proceeded to take out a newspaper and start to read. "*Can you read that without glasses?*" I asked incredulously considering he was a good 15 years older than I. "*Not really,*" he said, "*but I've lost my glasses.*"

"Here have mine," said the first homeless man graciously handing over his reading glasses. Just then a posh four wheel drive pulled up and out jumped a well-dressed woman. *"Good morning",* she said, *"would you guys like some hot macaroni cheese for lunch?"* Both men seemed lost for words. *"Would you like some madam?"* she asked.

"I'd love some," I said, *"but I'm just about to catch the bus to Waihi and unfortunately can't take food on the bus. What about you guys? Hot macaroni cheese sounds pretty delicious."* At which they both responded *"yes please"*. She presented them each with a tin foil container of steaming macaroni cheese, a plastic fork and a serviette, said *"enjoy"* and hopped back in her car and drove off.

There was a moment of stillness and then the first homeless man looked at me with tears in his eyes and said: *"There are some beautiful people in the world."*

"There sure are" I replied. *"I guess you come across some not so beautiful people too though."*

"Yes," he replied, *"some people beat me up and take my things, but I try to remember the beautiful people."*

It was time for me to catch my bus. I said my goodbyes, crossed the road, boarded the bus, and as I sat down I thought: I have just experienced the kingdom of God – God's grace and love in all its fullness.

It's these experiences of God's Kingdom, His presence on earth, that urge me to get involved and invested in it.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth" is I believe, not a plea for God's intervention on earth, but a plea for God to empower me with his Holy Spirit to manifest His kingdom on earth.

As author Keith Meyers writes in his book *"Whole Life Transformation"*: *"God's grace intends us to become forgiving people, not just forgiven people, to be loving people, not just loved people. It is God's grace that empowers us to love in this life."*

I started this message in the Godly Play way and so I'll end it with the Godly Play way of wondering.

I wonder which part of this story you liked best?

I wonder which part of this story you think is the most important?

I wonder which part of this story is also about you?

I know which part is also about me, the part where I am loved equally and wastefully and radically no matter what I do, how hard I work or how I'm rated in the world. Nothing can separate me from the love of God

This is Gospel wisdom - wisdom that is counter intuitive, challenging and hard to accept.

This is a wisdom that changes my life and calls me to follow the way of Jesus – a way of unconditional love and compassion – in the hope of changing lives too. What about you? I wonder?