

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Coming in Last

A sermon preached September 21, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Luke 13:10-17 ¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing

Matthew 20:1-15 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'"

They used to be called *blue laws*, the civil regulations that protected observance of the Sabbath. It may be hard for young people to believe, but once no stores were open on Sunday, certainly no bars. There were no sports leagues competing with church services Sunday morning. And for the sincere Christian, there was no lawn mowing, hedge trimming, painting,

fixing, playing or movie going on Sunday.

Blue laws have mostly passed into obscurity now, though I encounter vestiges of them whenever I slip and mention in one of my regular phone calls to my mother that I might have spent part of a Sunday afternoon mowing the lawn. "On the *Sabbath!*?" she inevitably responds. I always remind her that it's not the Sabbath, it's Sunday, and that I work most Sundays anyway. She's 96 years old and well remembers when Sunday was to be kept holy, instead of wholly consumed by busyness.

I was in the area of Nashville, Michigan, recently and passed a pony cart with two adults and two young persons in it. Dressed in black, white, and light blue, my guess is they were folks who are exceedingly well acquainted with the laws regulating the Sabbath even in our very un-Sabbatarian times.

In the scripture interpretation and biblical values wars of today not many Christians in America or Europe get riled about keeping the Sabbath. Not so in other cultures, not so in orthodox and Hasidic Jewish circles, and certainly not so in Jesus' time. Some Sabbatarians (those who jealously guarded the Sabbath law) even argued whether it was appropriate to let new wine "work" – that is, ferment – on the Sabbath.

God's law demanded a day of rest, and what Jesus did in healing that poor woman on the Sabbath was a gross violation. The woman is crippled with a "spirit." In that antique time, superstition, not science, explained disease. Twisted and bent, the woman moves only with difficulty and with pain. Jesus, very much aware of the Sabbath laws but no respecter of their inhumane application, heals her. It was a simple act of compassion, a gift of grace.

I suspect the leader of the synagogue was at least ambivalent about the healing. For eighteen years her painful affliction would have been of great concern to the whole community. Everyone knew her, loved her, grieved for her, prayed for her, pitched in and helped her as much as they could. And now this wonderful thing had happened!

On the other hand, the leader of the synagogue's primary responsibility was to remind folks of the rules. What Jesus had done was an offense against the Law. What could be clearer than what had been carved onto Moses' tablets on Mt. Sinai: "...the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns." (Exodus 20:10)

The leader was at two with himself. He wanted to rejoice at every occasion of grace, and he wanted to maintain spiritual discipline. Would a relaxed approach to one of God's laws lead to spiritual anarchy regarding all of them? His head wins over heart as he stands up in the middle of the crowd and proceeds to ruin their day with his legalistic mantra: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." Although no doubt a wise man, he failed to grasp that

God obeys no rules, especially his own.

There is a different kind of offense occurring in the second story. It's not the Sabbath laws being offended in the parable of the workers in the vineyard; it's our vaunted sense of fairness. A vineyard owner strikes an agreement with the workers for the usual wage, and the men head off grateful for a day that will bring in some money. At noon additional workers arrive, apparently willing to make the trip to the countryside for even half a day's wages. At three, and five, and even at six o'clock several more workers arrive. Well, even an hour or two's pay is something. They're all poor, all desperate.

At sundown the landowner faithfully follows the Torah (Deuteronomy 24:14-15) which demands, "You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them...."

The landowner faithfully obeys the Torah, but he reads it backwards and upside down, for the workers hired early in the morning receive a silver coin, just as agreed, but so do the partial day workers. Regardless of whether a man had worked only half a day, or a quarter of a day, or only two hours, or one, the same wage.... Those shirkers, you can hear the full-day workers muttering, they received the same as we, the strong, the long-enduring, the sun-suffering, the eager-beavers. Their sense of outrage deepens with the darkness. Their murmurs rise to angry shouts, against the employer, against their fellow workers. Where was justice? Where was common decency? Where was our due?

Ambivalence inevitably produces hypocrisy, and even today we are powerfully ambivalent when it comes to matters of law and matters of fairness. We feel it when we read about massive corporate meltdowns in the financial world and know that corporate leaders walk away with ten of millions of dollars in compensation. We feel it when someone down the block gets caught in the mortgage foreclosure mess, but receives reprieve from special laws or regulations that don't apply to you. It comes into play any time someone seems to get special privilege or focused attention or a more widely-opened door that we and our kind do not. Ambivalence toward our neighbors and friends, our past and our future, and our sense of self-worth and value traps us in a tension between altruism and resentment toward others in need. "That's not fair!" is one of the oldest and most plaintive cries of childhood as issues of privilege and need arise within families, and the words of that landowner in Jesus' meddlesome parable come back to haunt us even in adulthood: "Are you jealous because I am generous?"

If you had the opportunity to put the question to Jesus as to what is the opposite of fairness, my bet is he would not have said *unfairness*, but *grace*. The two stories we have read in the Bible today have nothing to do with our concept of fairness and everything to do with revealing the difference in perspective between God's kingdom and our mundane world. These stories demonstrate God's alternative to the rigid and unfruitful ways we have of

understanding life. In Jesus' reality grace is persistently bursting into our rigid systems and routine assumptions, confusing us with love and perplexing us with new ways of seeing, receiving, and touching one another.

Remember this general principle in reading the Bible: if we don't feel offended by a scripture passage, we probably aren't getting the point. Each of today's stories concerns a violation of sacred principle. The one which hits us the hardest, of course, is the story of the workers in the vineyard and their pay. We don't give a fig for Sabbath laws, but my oh my how profoundly do we care about what we earn! We care about rewards and punishments, about getting our due and others getting their just deserts.

We care enormously about such things. They constitute the stuff of our economic lives; they determine our relationships with one another and with the rest of the world. Who eats at our tables? Who lives in our neighborhoods? Who earns our respect? People who earn like us, spend like us, who hold the same principles of envy as we do. And thus we position ourselves out of touch spiritually, emotionally, and ethically with much of the rest of the world. After all, we are in the upper ten percent of the economically advantaged, we are the landowners, the hired, the well-connected, the determiners of who gets what and how much. Given our status, the landowner's behavior seems in opposition to our interests.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" What a pesky question! We can well understand the elder brother's sullen reaction when his father throws the party for the prodigal. We can understand the rage of the religious leaders when Jesus consorts with undesirables like sinners and gentiles. And even if we're not Sabbatarian, we can with leader of the synagogue objecting to the woman's healing because, gosh darn it, that's what respect for the law means!

But here comes Jesus inserting alternative ways of looking at the world, insisting we begin to see other people, the law, and money differently. After all, our perspective is rooted to the ground. We see at eye level. Jesus sees from the cross. His view is the more preciously purchased; his view comes with credentials we simply don't have.

What is the difference between the poor and the so-called deserving poor? What do we mean when we speak of an undeveloped nation? What is an inner city child? We toss such phrases around as though we speaking of a separate category of humanity that hasn't qualified yet for our attention. What is the role of privilege in our world? How does fairness serve in our quest for wholeness, goodness, compassion? What does a blessing look like to those of us already so richly blessed, as opposed to those who are afflicted and bent and poor and who know too little of grace? What does hope look like? What does community look like? What does privilege have to do with any of this?

All these questions are prompted by these soul-stretching stories, for they all concern the flow of grace in our relationships, in our understanding of

personal dignity, and of our grasp of what generosity and compassion mean. As the presidential campaign races toward November 4, as we engage in conversation with friends about our values being played out in this election, the challenge is to keep such stories as today's echoing in our heads. In each, grace confronted the principles of the day and intruded in uncomfortable ways upon the common sense of the times. Neither the woman bent double with her affliction nor the vineyard workers hired late in the day deserved what they got based on conventional wisdom.

Think about these eccentric stories as we attempt to hoard our resources and keep ourselves safe, and insist on our due, and restrict the surprise of grace by being fair. Think about rules and regulations that intrude upon compassion and divide persons into deserving and undeserving. And ask, where will we create generosity that bows to compassion, not calculation?

Christ's teachings go straight to the very heart of a whole set of unhealthy and unholy assumptions we make about the worth of persons, the use of wealth, and our relationship with one another and with the world. The stories are clear that the operating principles of tit-for-tat, you scratch my back I'll scratch yours have no place in God's kingdom. The story of the vineyard turns upside-down the principles by which we now live, principles which diminish compassion and warp generosity into concern only for our own and our kind. Jesus teaches that the jealousies which inflame us in the marketplace and in our homes and distort love into competitiveness have no place in his kingdom where, after all, the last shall be first.

God's covenant of grace struggles to transform us into a generous people from our captivation with envy. Are we envious because God is generous to our neighbor, our competitor, our brother or sister, our enemy? Are we offended because the rules protecting our privilege were suspended by grace? Are we enslaved to calculation and unable to freely give of ourselves because we are so busy counting cost? Indeed, do we really give at all, or do we only buy favors and calculate consequences? We don't actually *give* until we do so out of compassion and grace, and we're not compassionate until we're generous, and we're not generous until we are freed from calculation.

Contrary to the principles we live by, God doesn't ask us to earn grace; it's free; it is generosity. How can we be less than generous in sharing it?