

The Strange Grace of God

TINF

Exodus 16:2-18

Matthew 20: 1-16

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who continues to call to the vineyard all day long.

I need some help with my cell phone texting. What does LOL mean? Laugh out loud. Okay. What about OMG. Oh, my God. Okay. What about TINF? That Is Not Fair. That is what I wanted to name my sermon this week "TINF."

Let me begin with a story. A fellow named Jones died, and went to hell. He walked up to the counter, which looked very much like an old 1920's hotel. The fellow behind the counter said "Welcome, Mr. Jones. We have been expecting you. It has been our experience that people like you prefer a single room. So here is your key."

Mr. Jones protested. "Hold on there. This is a mistake. There is no way I should be in hell. Back on earth I was a fine upright man. I obeyed all the rules. I dotted all the "I"s and crossed all the "T"s. I always did things right and I never tolerated people who did not. This is a mistake."

The fellow behind the counter grinned and said. "Yes, sometimes they do make mistakes up there, contrary to their own publicity. I tell you what. Go out that door, cross the street paved with good intentions, and take the up escalator."

Mr. Jones did just that. A while later Jones, came back, stormed in, and took his key without a word. The fellow behind the counter said "So how was it?" In disgust Jones replied "You would not believe all the riff raff that have let into that place."

Jesus also tells stories. He does it all through the Gospels. He does so to get folks' attention. But why do they have to be so annoying? Why does he have to be so intentionally provoking? It really makes my job a lot harder. People are always getting upset when they read one they do not like.

Jesus tells about a son who runs off to waste all his inheritance in wild living, and when he repents and comes home, the father takes him back with only words of joy. No scolding, no lecture, no "I told you so" speech. Just the open

arms of his father. It is the older brother who complains to high heaven that TINF, this is not fair.

“TINF.” That is not fair. We could put that on all kinds of annoying Jesus stories.

I mean, he made these stories up, right? Why did he have to provoke people so? The landowner in today’s parable could easily have adjusted everybody’s wages. That would have been fair. He could have paid the first workers first, and the last workers last – then nobody would know that he gave everybody the same thing. But oh no, the vineyard owner tells his manager to pay the last first, and to give them all the same. Jesus is just asking for trouble with such a story. And he gets it. Nobody is ever going to use this story in a class on how to run your business.

I cannot tell you how many times over the years I have taught this story in a Bible study group, and I spend most of the time fending off complaints from people saying “That is not fair. The vineyard owner is not playing fair. You can’t run a business that way.” So let’s get it straight once and for all – you are right. Absolutely right. TINF: Jesus says God is not fair.

God is generous. God is mercy within mercy within mercy. God is good and good to us. But God is not fair.

But Jesus is not talking about what is fair, is he? He is not talking about how to run your vineyard, or your small business. He tells us right up front: this is about the kingdom of heaven. “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.”

So what is this “kingdom of heaven” thing that Jesus is always talking about? From other stories, we know that it is like a mustard seed, tiny at first and growing into a beautiful bush. The kingdom of heaven is like a bit of yeast put into a whole pile of bread dough. The tiny yeast changes the all the dough. It is like a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price. There is terrific joy when one finds the “kingdom of heaven.” Today the kingdom of heaven is like a vineyard owner who calls people all day long, and then pays them all the same. It is a place where the last shall be first and the first last. Which I take to mean that there will be a lot of surprises, and lots of equality.

The kingdom of heaven is that place, any place, where God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. It is that place, any place, where people love God and

their neighbors as themselves. We are praying for it every time we offer the Lord's prayer.

The kingdom of heaven is that place where folk are treated with grace and equality, where each has enough and no one has too much. Where manna from heaven is rained upon all; where the messiah comes to talk with any and everybody, not just the folk at the head of the line. It appears that God will let anybody into this kingdom: gay, straight, rich, poor, any color, any age, a great athlete or a complete klutz – all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. All who say yes to the vineyard owner's call will find a place for them. All shall be equal at the end of the day.

TINF, that is not fair. But it is God.

Jesus tells annoying parables. But do you notice who gets annoyed the most? The ones who think they are in the front of the line. The ones who think that God should consider them before anybody else. In its day, Jesus seems to be aiming this parable at the religious elite – the ones who have kept all the kosher rules, but who had also managed to put themselves at the head of the community. They have divided the whole neighborhood into groups they labeled the religious ones and the sinners. They were always sure about who was on first, and who should be left out of the game.

Jesus intends to annoy the heck out of us when we get on our high horse about being cooler, or cleaner, or more pious than somebody else. When we are sure that we are at the head of the line, that is when Jesus wants to get us turned around. He wants to get us turned toward the kingdom of heaven, which is coming among us in some surprising places.

One of the places I have seen this most clearly over the years is in Christian small group gatherings. If you want to taste the Kingdom of heaven, I urge you to join such a group.

I have been in a lot of them over the years, with a lot of different kinds of people: with college students and professors, with welfare mothers and guys from the corner, with regular folk who go out to work each day. When the group first meets, there is a lot of politeness; and there is often a bit of a hierarchy. Some are immediately seen as more spiritual, or as knowing more about the Bible. Some talk more, some hang back. In this stage the group is in the room, but they are not together.

But as the group goes along, life happens. Sometimes it is a joy shared, and then celebrated by the whole group: A new job, a new baby, an anniversary of being clean and sober. Sometimes a tragedy is shared: A loved one gets hurt; a marriage ends; a business fails. Life happens. This is when the façade falls away and people discover that we are all in this together. Nobody is at the head of the line. Every person needs the grace of God just as much as the others.

A small group is a place to taste the equality of the kingdom of heaven, and the manna that comes without our doing anything but opening our arms. My first real experience of this was in a group in seminary. About eight of us met each week with a professor as a part of course in pastoral care. The group assignment was that we were to learn more about ourselves as people and as potential pastors. So there was a lot of jockeying and wary sharing. Nobody wanted to look bad. Neither did anybody want to look particularly pious. In the middle of the year, our professor, a very patient 50 year old hospital chaplain got the news that his son had died on the mission field in Peru. His son had been bitten by a very poisonous snake on a trail while traveling from one village to the next. Life happens. Sometimes death happens. The whole group mourned together. There was great equality in our shared suffering, and surprising grace as we helped our teacher.

We are all in this together. Nobody is first in line.

These moments happen all over. The kingdom of heaven is as close as a neighbor in need, or a hand held out to us in welcome. They happen at school when a new student is made welcome. They happen at the office or at the coffee shop when we listen to someone who needs our attention. They happen on mission trips and in service projects, when we realize that we are not at the head of the line – but God is present in lots of surprising places.

The amazing part, the amazing grace part of this is that these are places that the people begin to approach the kingdom of heaven. These are the moments, in joy and in sorrow, when the presence of Christ among us begins to be real. When we quit the voting on “who’s on first, and what’s on second”. It is in those moments when we realize that the vineyard owner has given us to each other. TINF: God is not fair, but God is good.

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