

“At Work in the Fields of the Lord”

If you are a firstborn child you know the frustration of being denied privileges such as staying up late to watch TV, reading after lights out, or getting to eat candy on Halloween. If you are a second born child you know the glory of getting those privileges and more at the same time as your older sibling. Parents seem most strict with the first child, and by the time that first child has earned a privilege it seems too hard to hold the second or third child to the same time table as the first. They relent and give everyone permission simultaneously. This is an additional frustration for first-born children. We have to wait the longest and behave the best in order to earn these perks. The younger ones are just along for the ride. As a firstborn I can tell you it really stinks.

Today’s parable from Jesus is like that. The landowner needs help in his vineyards. Throughout the day from dawn until nearly dusk he keeps going to the town to hire more workers. He tells them that he will give them a fair wage. I imagine the workers expect to be paid according to the number of hours they put in. Those that came late in the day will get paid less than those who came before. It is only fair.

But when the end of the work day arrives, he starts by paying the late arrivals first and those who have worked all day last. Those that worked all day see that the latecomers get a full day’s wages. It crosses their mind that they might get a bonus for working all day. But no, the landowner pays everyone a full day’s wages. If I were one of the workers I know I would be annoyed. Those who worked all day were paid exactly what they agreed to; it is only by their own calculus that they feel cheated. In their words, “...you have made them equal to us.”

Jesus began this parable with the words “The kingdom of heaven is like...” as I have said before this is a signal that something unusual is coming in the story that follows. Like the laborers who worked all day our sense of fairness is challenged. But instead of taking the story literally let’s do as Jesus intended and take it metaphorically. Jesus’ story uses a situation with which we can identify in order to provide the zinger that upsets the norm and gives us a clue to what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. In this case the Kingdom is not fair in the conventional sense. It is not a meritocracy. Rather, in God’s Kingdom people get what they need. God’s generosity outstrips our childish sense of fairness. If we compare this parable to another story, this one from the Old Testament, we might be able to get past our playground sense of fairness.

In the Book of Exodus the people cry out that they are starving. As usual for this story they tell Moses, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”<sup>1</sup> God, hearing the cries of the people, sends them the Bread of Angels, manna from heaven. Manna falls from the sky. All the people need to do is collect it. One can collect and eat as much as they want. There is one catch, in that the manna cannot be kept overnight. If someone tries to hoard the manna it

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 16:3 NRSV

gets wormy and rotten. Manna is provided sufficient for one day's needs and not more. They get their daily bread.

We can also come back to the Gospels and we see Jesus' feeding of the crowds who followed him into the wilderness. With a few meager loaves and fishes thousands of people are feed. No one goes hungry and there is some leftover. We might say they deserved to go hungry if they were stupid enough to wander after Jesus without bringing some food. Once again the people are feed more than adequately regardless of what they deserved in a human calculation.

In each instance we are being led to realize that the Kingdom that is to come is one where all God's children are cared for. No one is left out. No one goes hungry. Also no one has excess. Everyone has enough.

There is a wonderful little movie that I recommend to everyone. It is called "Defending Your Life."<sup>2</sup> It stars Albert Brooks as a self-centered jerk and Meryl Streep as a saintly woman. They both find themselves in the outskirts of Heaven. There everyone wears the same robes, there is public transportation, housing is good, and food is plentiful and calorie-free. Each person before going on to a permanent state of bliss or returning to earth has to defend his or her life before a tribunal. Streep's character glides through while Brook's character struggles. She understood more about what the Kingdom of Heaven means in her life while he has to learn.

Jesus, the poor peasant from a remote backwater of the Roman Empire, tries to teach us through his parables that constructs in human society are out of kilter with what God desires for us. He yearns for us to realize that every person is valued by God and deserves, as a beloved child of God, the benefits of this life. Like the workers in the field, the thousands in the wilderness, and the people during the Exodus, we are all deserving of our "daily bread" a metaphor for having all of our needs met.

None of us is immune from selfishness. None of us is immune from hoarding. That is why Jesus points out how the Kingdom of Heaven is different. Jesus wants to prepare us for a new way of being. If we can prepare by starting to live into the Kingdom in this life we are working to help bring that Kingdom into being for all of us every one of us who is a child of God. What a wonderful world that will be.

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<sup>2</sup> "Defending Your Life" written and directed by Albert Brooks. ©1991.