Upside Down: God in the Vineyard

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 *“He replied to the one speaking for the rest, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn’t we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?’**“Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first.”* Matthew 20:13-16

My kids used to complain, “That’s not fair” when something didn’t go their way. And sometimes, things weren’t fair. As a mom of four, I tried to get everyone the same thing as much as possible, but you and I know that in the end it is an impossible task to get everyone the exact same thing and have everyone feel that things are fair.

Last week in story time with the preschool children I read an illustrated version of the Lord’s Prayer, and in the page about forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, this wonderful man and his daughter who had helped to clean up and repair a senior women’s yard and broken down fence refuse payment for services. Why? Because they wanted to participate in God’s vision of what it means to forgive our debtors, to love abundantly, to do something without need of payment precisely because she needed assistance and they longed to live out the justice and love of God’s kingdom here on earth. With the tangible work of their hands and labor, they made her home a safer and more beautiful place to live. **Isn’t this a simple example of the just world for all we long to live in?**

Today’s parable is about the upside down nature of God’s kingdom where God loves everyone and turns our expectations of what we should receive for our hard work upside down.

In God’s kingdom, there is room enough for everyone. The table is wide. If more people show up to eat, we will simply pull out the leaves and extend the table or grab some card tables and make the table longer and longer and longer. This kingdom of God’s is a place where the hungry are fed first and those who have clung to the sides of the room or the edge of the field feeling forgotten and unseen, are brought and placed at the front of the room and presented with the same delicious food, wages and hope as everyone else who has been laboring in the vineyard all day or all year, or as many of us may feel, for too long. We can resent folks who just show and receive all the benefits and yet, Jesus has a story to tell us about how the kingdom of God is.

The kingdom of God, is a place of hope for everyone.

Our special song for today written by Jack Johnson is called “Upside Down.” It begins asking, “Who’s to say what’s impossible.” I love that idea.

**What’s the kingdom of God like?**

Maybe it’s the impossible happening right now in our lives because we turn the world upside down. Remember when we were children and hung upside down on the monkey bars and discovered what the world looks like upside down? I remember my two braids hanging by the side of my face getting in the way of my peripheral vision and staring up into the Colorado blue sky. Why don’t we try a little of that child eye’s perspective and go outside and lie down in the still green grass and look up? Perhaps, if we slow down and pay attention to the cloud patterns and whether the storm is coming or going, we can begin to disrupt our normal patterns of seeing the world and begin to see the kingdom of heaven and earth as God sees it. **What if we turned the world upside down?**

In the song “Upside Down” we are encouraged to see things through the lens of being upside down. This perspective allows us to see what Johnson calls “a love we can share with everyone/We’ll sing and dance with everyone/I don’t want this feeling to go away.”

**What if we let this expansive upside down thinking to filter into how we see the world?** **What if we imagined that we were looking at the world through what the Rev. Jonathan Walton calls “a lens of love?”[[1]](#endnote-1)** Reading the scriptures, learning from the parables, living out our lives while putting on a lens of love, the same lens of love that God wears every time she looks at you or me, or especially anyone who feels like they do not matter, makes sure that we see that that we all matter.

Here is the thing about God, she is always on the side of the lonely and the left out. God teaches us in this parable and all through the scriptures to see where the marginalized and victimized are and then, invites us to sit right there and love.

When we learn that those who showed up last to labor in the fields received the same payment as those who worked all day, we can at first say, that’s not fair!!

For example, when my kids got mad at me many years ago because I didn’t provide a fair food option or special experience, the reality is with 13 years between the oldest to the youngest child, things were not going to always be the same. Some things will always be different and what appears unfair may in fact be what is needed for each particular person at that particular time. And I was ok with my parenting not being fair. I loved them all equally, but what happened may have differed from time to time, and person to person.

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Parables are stories to help us to better understand how God loves us and Jesus didn’t expect the disciples to believe his stories literally, and yet, they also tell a deeper truth, a truth about how God’s love and justice belong in the world.

The Rev. Walton writes about the importance of moral imagination in understanding the scriptures. Walton says, “Moral imagination challenges us to look at what appears to be nothing to identify something. It asks us to look upon those who are deemed nobody by society to see somebody loved by God! Like faith, moral imagination is both a noun and a verb. The writer of Hebrews said it well: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Faith is an assurance of the hope that we possess and a description of our actions. Moral imagination is something that we have, and it is something that we can enact. As my grandmother likes to say, “There is no need in being heavenly minded if you are no earthly good.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

I love that saying from Jonathan Walton’s grandmother. She is one of the wise elders who teaches us that God wants us to be building a kingdom of love and justice now, not just hoping it all works out once we are dead. That is the thing about what it means to love and follow Jesus. We can’t be holding onto a love that matters for just us, or just our family, or just our church, or just our community here on a hill in West Barnstable, or just us who live in the United States of America. God’s plan, God’s kingdom is like the parable Jesus is telling to his disciples. The wider context of this parable locates the story at the end of Jesus’ ministry. He knows he is about to die as his journey into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey on what we remember on Palm Sunday will happen in a few short days. Jesus wants to teach all those listening to him that God’s kingdom is going to turn the world upside down.

We have been taught that those who work the hardest will be blest the most. *Jesus says no.* We have been taught that we can pull ourselves up by our “bootstraps and win the prize.” *Jesus says no*. In God’s kingdom, in the world we will be building, there are no “us-es” and “thems.” The Good News, the blessing of food and wages and a place at the table is for everyone. This is the party we have all been waiting to be invited to, because here all are welcome. Here all are fed. Here all belong. This truly is a world turned upside down. I can’t wait to be part of the “moral imagination” of this group of radical revolutionaries who see the world with lenses of love and realize that I matter, that you matter, that we matter. And when we all matter, no one, ever is left behind. Amen.

1. A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in Its World for Our World (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. 50 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)