

“God’s Economy”

Matthew 20:1-16

Richard C. Allen

September 24, 2017

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

I want to speak this morning on the topic, “God’s Economy.” A subtitle for this sermon might be ‘moments of grace,’ In my view, the Parable of the Vineyard Keeper is about grace, the grace of God. Grace is a difficult concept to grasp, especially for those of us who were raised on the principle that everything has to be earned. You get what you earn. There’s no free lunch.

I’m sure Jesus would agree that there is a great value in working and supporting one’s family and saving money for a rainy day. But, he also knows there are some things money can’t buy; sweat can’t earn; and even working overtime can’t afford. There are some things we need which we can only acquire through someone’s generosity, through someone’s gift.

One of the greatest dilemmas we face in our culture is being on the receiving end of a gift. Someone surprises us with an unmerited gift, and we say: ‘oh you shouldn’t have. I don’t deserve it. I can’t accept it.’ We struggle with being on the receiving end of grace. Perhaps that is why the Parable of the Vineyard Keeper is so difficult to embrace. Do we not tend to identify with the worker who is hired at 8:00 in the morning, works all day, receives his agreed upon wage, and then is outraged when he witnesses the same wage paid to the guy who has worked only one hour! Where’s the fairness in that? It’s not fair at all, yet, it is laced with grace. God’s economy is laced with grace. In God’s economy, everyone gets what they need. In God’s economy, there is enough. In God’s economy there is an occasional free lunch!

In the Parable of the Vineyard Keeper, there is an invitation to imagine the joy of a generous heart. One way to read the parable is to focus on the grumbler. He certainly has something to grumble about. The other way to read the parable is to focus on the one who chooses to be outrageously generous, more generous than the situation demands, more generous than the culture expects. When Jesus told this parable, he was inviting his disciples to consider the sheer joy of being generous. It's as if he has observed that they haven't yet made this discovery. And it pains him to watch his followers be stingy, especially with their love. More than anything, he wants them to embrace the new economy, God's economy, the economy of grace where generosity is the currency, where there are no shortages of love.

A number of people have been my teachers when it comes to understanding God's economy. My sister, Debbie, lived her whole life with a bi-polar disorder. At age 19, she married Bob. A year later, she gave birth to a boy, Ricky, who had no use of any muscles. Six months later, Bob died of a heart attack. My sister, who could barely take care of herself, turned her son over to the State of Massachusetts where he lived in a nursing home for the next thirty two years. About once a month, Debbie would hitch a ride up to Northampton, she would sit by Ricky's bed, and she would sing to him. She had a repertoire of about ten love songs. She would sing, "Roses are red, my love, violets are blue..." She would sing, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..." (Her voice was no better than mine!) After an hour of singing, she'd catch a ride back home. I don't know if my sister ever heard of the Parable of the Vineyard Keeper, but I do know she understood what it means to embrace God's economy. She taught me about grace, about loving when the love can be neither earned nor returned. When we buried her boy, we sang all ten of the love songs. It was a grace-fest.

I think about George Duto. If you Google him, nothing will appear on your screen. He was the CEO of the Wilbraham Construction Company. An occasional visitor in our home back in the 1960's, he was a big man: tall, broad in the shoulders, huge hands, a thick neck. He had an imposing presence. We were all a little afraid of him. But we had been raised to greet every visitor politely, and with a handshake. I will not forget the first time I shook his hand. I thought he'd probably squeeze my hand right off. Instead, he shook my hand and there deposited a shiny 50 cent piece. And with a sparkle in his eye, he gave me a wink that said something like, "and don't spend it all in one place,"

I had never been on the receiving end of such outrageous generosity. We had to earn our allowance. If we needed pocket money, we had to earn it. In those days, if you had 50 cents, you could go to a movie and take a friend; you could buy a book at Johnson's Bookstore; you could treat three friends to a Good Humor ice cream cone. Mr. Duto's generosity transformed me. He helped me to discover the simple joy of a generous heart. I wanted to be like him. I had no desire to work construction, but I wanted the satisfaction that comes with bringing a little joy to somebody else.

Call it grace. Call it love. Call it a generous heart. Call it the realm of God. Call it what you will. Jesus came into the world to liberate us from being so tight, so calculating, so afraid of not having enough. He invited his disciples, and he invites us all to be on the receiving end of grace; and then, when the opportunity arises, to be on the providing end of grace. This is what I call the Economy of God. I find that when I allow the Economy of God to rule my heart and my behavior, I am living in the greatest of hope. Amen.