

Sometimes everything depends on *how you ask* for what you desire, as illustrated in this story:

Every afternoon two monks strolled in the garden of their monastery. One day as they were walking along a wooded path, one of the monks asked the other if he thought it would be a pleasant experience to have a cigarette as they continued on. The other agreed, but they decided they should ask the master of the monastery for his permission.

The next day as they came out for their walk, one of the monks was smoking a cigarette and the other was not. “We agreed to ask the master,” said the monk who was not smoking. “That is so, and I did,” replied the other. “I asked for permission to smoke and was refused.” “How did you ask?” “I approached the master and said, ‘When I am walking and meditating in the garden is it all right if I smoke a cigarette?’ and he said, ‘Absolutely not!’”

The monk smoking a cigarette replied: “You see, my brother, it is in the asking of the question that you were bound to be denied. I approached the master and said, ‘Master, when I am smoking in the garden, is it all right if I meditate?’ and he said, ‘Certainly.’”

Why is it that the best stories tend to turn our expectations upside down— sometimes answering questions we didn’t even know enough to ask? Jesus’ most intriguing parables—like many traditional tales that have spoken to generations on questions of wisdom and inner truth—often make us do a “doubletake,” and thereafter tend to stick in our minds and hearts. (This story and comment was taken from *Synthesis*, 9/21/14.)

Such is the case with the Parable of the Tenants. The story is rolling along just fine with different workers hired on at different times during the day until we get to the paying of the workers at the end of the day.

The zinger in the story comes when those workers who were hired last and only worked one hour were paid for a full day's work, as were those who were hired a little earlier and a little earlier still. When it came to paying the ones who had born the heat of the day, working the entire day, of course they thought they would be paid more even though they had agreed in advance to work for the usual day's pay. They are shocked when they are paid only what the others had been paid.

"It's not fair!" They grumbled against the landowner who reminded them that they had agreed to work a full day for the usual daily wage. The landowner told them to take their pay and go, that he had done them no wrong. He asked them, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I'm generous?"

Jesus says that this story illustrates how the kingdom of God works. What can we glean from this story about how the kingdom works? Well, the first thing that is obvious from the story is that all of the workers were treated the same. Perhaps this means that God does not play favorites. The other thing that this illustrates is God's concern that people's needs are met. Those who worked less than a full day had the same needs as those who had worked all day. In providing a day's pay for each worker, each one could go and provide for his family. It seems that God is more interested in providing for each of us than in paying each of us for services rendered.

I was surprised that in all of the commentary that I read this week, no one brought up situations similar to this one in our country today. Jobs are scarce. Unemployment is still high. There are many who go every day to the marketplace, specifically to these day labor job sites, and they wait and wait, but no one hires them.

We assisted a man and his wife with the Parish Ministry Fund earlier this year who, for years, had worked through one of the day labor companies here in Asheville. He worked construction and was able to go to work every day. Then, when construction work was no longer available, he wandered around every day looking for work anywhere he could find it. With some help from our church, and from some individuals in our church, and working with ABCCM, he has found a regular job and is a step closer to being in permanent housing with his disabled wife.

In Forest City, N.C., the town where I grew up, there was a cotton mill that employed most of the town's people. In the early days, the mill actually built houses for their employees to live in. Of course that cotton mill and the ones in adjacent towns have long since closed down. Perhaps you lament as I do that our country hardly makes anything, hardly produces anything anymore. I'll bet we would be hard pressed this morning to come up with ten garments among all the clothing that we are wearing in here this morning that were produced solely in our country.

I don't know what the answer is or how to turn things around, but I know that it would be great if there were some kind of resurgence of industry in our country so that people could have jobs and make a decent living to support their families. I am convinced that many are unemployed not because they don't want to work, but because the jobs just aren't there. As we think of this parable, and of those waiting in the marketplace hoping to be hired, let's remember to pray for the unemployed and the underemployed who are working but unable to make a living wage. Like this God who saw to it that each had what they needed, may we as God's people work to try and provide a living wage for those in need of work.

As Mark Twain said, “Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture which they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.” In this parable of the workers, could we possibly be hearing that we should rejoice in what others receive regardless of what we may think is *our* due?

And as Paul Tournier reminds us: “The human heart does not obey the rules of logic; it is constitutionally contradictory.” And as someone else put it, God is more interested in making us *what we ought to be* than in giving us what we think we ought to have.

Karl Rahner wrote in *Biblical Sermons* (N. Y.: Herder and Herder, 1966): “The thing which God freely disposes of, the thing we cannot negotiate or calculate about with God, is ultimately our own selves. Our own selves, just as we are: with our life, with our temperament, with our destiny, with our surroundings, with our time, with our heredity, with our family, with everything that we happen to be and cannot change. And whenever we grumble and complain about others with whom God has dealt differently, we are really refusing to accept our own selves from the hands of God.”

“This, then, is our great life’s work: to accept ourselves as the mysterious and gradually revealed gift of the eternal generosity of God. For everything that we have, even the painful and mysterious, is God’s generous gift; [and] God gives himself with this gift. ... All of us, young and old alike, are really latecomers. And yet God is willing to give us everything if we will only accept it—ourselves and himself and life without end.”

As Isabel Anders writes, (and I quote) “Why do we have such difficulty accepting God’s generosity and naming it for what it truly is? Sometimes linear thinking—who should get what—just won’t get us “there.” The curved lines of story and parable show us ourselves in perhaps not such a good light—but ultimately one that shines itself on

our condition and awakens us to the love that stands behind this immeasurable gift.” (Unquote) *Synthesis*, 9/21/14, Postscript.

Beloved, it is this love, God’s love, that assists us in thankfully receiving the gift from God of ourselves with all of our foibles and shortcomings. It is also God’s love that helps us remember those standing in the marketplace in our day and time without work, and it is God’s love that will not let us rest until all who wish to do so have the opportunity to earn a living wage.

I’d like to close with the prayer for the unemployed from p. 824 in our prayer book.

Let us pray,

Heavenly Father, we remember before you those who suffer want and anxiety from lack of work. Guide the people of this land so to use our public and private wealth that all may find suitable and fulfilling employment, and receive just payment for their labor; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.