

The grace of God is startling, subversive, and always disorienting in a world where, “the first are first and the last are last.”

The Odd Predictability of Our Day

There is a sort of predictability in our world today. A sort of repetitious nature to the news headlines. And even as deeply polarized as our world feels, historically, this is a theme we continually see. Think about the predictability of our day. This politician points the finger at that politician. This celebrity is ranting about that celebrity.

Think of the headlines from the past few weeks. A caravan coming from Honduras to our southern border and the deployment of troops there. The synagogue shooting in Pittsburg, the letter bomber, and an increased polarization. The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. Or maybe the subtle message we continually hear for our world is this, “The first will be first, and the last will be last.”

There is something about our world that is inherently and mundanely predictable. We slowly drift into the tacit acceptance of things the way they are and assume that tomorrow has to be like today and this will continue on and on unaffected by anything. Paying brief attention to the news reveals the continual and perpetual repetitiousness of our daily experience.

Unoriginal sin and the Surprise of the Gospel

This becomes particularly acute when you read the biblical story, and you begin to recognize that a world filled with power-struggles, brokenness, sin, hatred, and etc. runs throughout the centuries. In some sense, the way of death, sin, and brokenness, is a rather unoriginal reality.

And so ever since the first Original Sin, sin in itself is actually rather unoriginal. Because there is a reality that our world has been governed by brokenness and sin since as long as one can remember.

One of my fellow students in the same program as myself is Jewish. So, this week when I saw her in class, I asked how she was handling it and wanted her to know I was praying for her. She said something that broke my heart. She said, “You know, it’s been a really hard week. But what is more heart-breaking is I really wish I could say I was shocked by the news, but I’m just not. This is what we’ve gone through for centuries.”

This got my mind spinning. Because there is this routine nature to our brokenness. There is something about our world we have come to expect - brokenness and more brokenness. At some point, you get to the place where you begin to consider that sin really isn’t all that original after all. This is the unoriginality of sin.

BUT...

But this isn’t the end of the story; the Christian story is one of movement, not stagnation. It is about Jesus coming to disorient us all to this reality. And at some level, this reality is exactly what made the startling life of Jesus so disorienting. Because as the despair of the repetition of the same began to set in, a rabbi from a small corner of the Roman Empire burst onto the scene and rattled the foundations of the mundane. He burst on the scene and declared,

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” Matthew 4.17

This message that Jesus came to proclaim and spent his entire life embodying and declaring is the disorienting message of the Gospel. This particular message, I would argue, is the very thesis of all that Jesus came to do. And the Kingdom of God is the center of all of Jesus’ teachings. The point of Jesus’ teaching and ministry was the Kingdom of God had arrived and was available here and now.

Repent - to change one’s thinking

This word “Repent” is the word, *Metanoia* in Greek. It is constructed of two particular Greek words. *Meta* - meaning to change (think “*Metamorphosis*”), and *Noia* - coming from the Greek verb meaning “to think.” So, at the core of Jesus message is this idea that we have to “think differently,” but what is the impetus to our change in thinking?

The arrival of the Kingdom of God in the here-and-now

For many of us, we tend to think of the “Kingdom of God/Heaven” as some sort of disembodied reality, which is somewhere far away from this place. When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he is speaking about the present reality of it here and now! It is this announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom of God, which is the shocking subversive surprise of the Gospel. I’m sure your thinking, “Why does any of this matter and what does it have to do with our text this morning?”

When we come to a text with the first words, “For the Kingdom of heaven is like...” it is important to have a functioning idea of what is the Kingdom of God. It is also important to know what it is doing for the 1st- century world and what it is doing in our world today.

Function and Purpose of Parables

Now, what follows is a parable. The parables of Jesus are not nice and conventional stories with a moral lesson. There is a tendency for us to reduce them to this, but that would be to fully miss the point of what Jesus is doing in parables. Jesus’ parables are intentionally designed to disorient us from our regular conventions, so Jesus can coax us into the alternative and unimaginable world that he calls the Kingdom of Heaven.

Parables as Subversive Surprise

It should be noted at the top that parables are not something Jesus invented. It was a popular teaching mechanism for many rabbis in the first century. Jesus often taught in parables, which was a way for those people who were actually looking and searching for the truth could find it.

If you weren't looking for the truth or if, like the Pharisees, you were looking to trip Jesus up, then the parables just became another story. But if you were looking for the truth like the marginalized and the least among us, truly looking for the truth of the Kingdom of God, a parable would be told, and the story would reveal the truth.

As we read the parables, there is a sense we should never be so certain about our understanding of the story. Be sure not to read the text solely with a "me-centered" perspective. Because if you are merely comfortable with the understanding of the parable, then it is quite likely that you are not truly understanding the subversive nature of the parable and it becomes just another story.

Parables as Imagination

We have a tendency to think of the parables as mere illustrations of greater biblical points, but to do so is a reduction of what Jesus was pursuing. We place a disproportionate weight on more didactic passages than on Jesus' stories.

New Testament Scholar, Scot McKnight, said, "Parables are fictional stories depicting an alternative world. The essence of his parables probe into this mindset he wants from his followers: 'Imagine a world like this.'" Fundamentally, parables provoke our imagination about how the world could be. The story, the parable, takes you into its world where you encounter a short or a longer sketch of a reality, of a world of what could be if people were to live like this.

Fundamentally, the parables invite you into an imagined, but possible world. And Jesus' Gospel announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom of God here-and-now means that this world is breaking into our presence right now.

It is Jesus' invitation for us to think anew about the Kingdom of God, to shake off the old dust of what we believe and imagine about the Kingdom of God, and allow ourselves to read with fresh eyes. And if we are able to allow Jesus' parables to do their work on us, we will begin to see a world that is only beginning to come into existence, the world called, The Kingdom of God. Think of how you enter a good book or a movie. You become fully engrossed in that world, and when you come out of that book or movie, you begin to see the world through a different lens. You have been changed by that world. And if you have engrossed yourself in that world, then you begin to live out that world in a new way. Suspend what you already know. Remember familiarity breeds unfamiliarity, try to look with fresh eyes on what sort of world Jesus is imagining.

"For the Kingdom of God is..." It is important to note that the Kingdom of God is interchangeable with the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven. And parables that begin with this statement typically want to define or depict the behavior of the King in the Kingdom, or they want to give you a contrast between those who belong in the Kingdom

and those who don't or lastly, they want to tell you something about the nature of the Kingdom itself.

What you should first notice is the word, "for" or "therefore" or "therewith." In the Greek, this word is a conjunction which inherently implies that it is connected to what immediately precedes it. So, let's look there...Matthew 19:30

"But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" Matthew 19.30

Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20.1-15

**"So, the last will be first, and the first will be last."
Matthew 20.16**

The Hiring of Workers

Vineyard work was brutally difficult and required the most laborers and a lot of strength. It was usually happening in the heat of Summer, just before the fall when the rains would come. So, you had to get all the workers you could onto the vineyard to harvest it before it was ruined by weather. Most owners of vineyards would go out to hire day-laborers to do this work, largely because it was so difficult. These day laborers were considered the lowest of the low. They only made one denarius, primarily a day's wage. Now, if you were a day-laborer, you were worse than a slave. Because at least slaves had a family, and a place to lay their head, at least slaves were promised meals every day. But if you were a day-laborer, you depended on this one bit of money that was just about enough to pay you for a day.

The story continues...

**"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."
Matthew 20.1-2**

The landowner goes out into the market and finds workers who are waiting for work, hoping to get hired for the day. They would do some of the hardest work out there, and they would do it for very little money. Now for whatever reason, apparently it was a massive harvest that year and the time was ripe for harvest. The landowner noticed and throughout the day as the Landowner recognizes he was not going to be able to finish the work went back to the marketplace and continued to hire more workers.

"About nine in the morning, he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around, He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing.' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'" Matthew 20.3-7

And he finds three more groups of workers for the day.

9am Workers - "Pay what is right"

There is some ambiguity around what their response is. The text says, "So they went." But that doesn't inherently mean they went into the vineyard. And think about it...If you showed up for a job and you decided you were going to work, and when you get to the salary discussion your boss simply said, "ehhhh I'll pay you what is right." Would you honestly take the job? Probably not. So, I think a fair reading of the text is "he said I will pay you what is right and so they left..." It gives the impression that they weren't too psyched about that idea.

12pm Workers

3pm Workers

5pm Workers - "Why are you standing here?"

Now notice that when the landowner gets to this final group, he doesn't offer "I will pay you what is right." And these guys don't really care because they are desperate. You have to figure that a guy who is still standing out there hoping for work in the 11th hour of the workday is just absolutely desperate. So, they say, "I'll take whatever I can get."

"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came, and each received a denarius. So, when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius." Matthew 20.8-10

The landowner decided he wanted to take care of the books and pay the workers. And it would seem the landowner had stuffed the envelopes prior to giving them to the foreman to distribute to the others.

The Initial Expectation

Now, let's break-down the numbers to get a better feel about how the foreman is paying the workers. So, the top part of this slides is the initial expectation of what they figured they would be paid. The 6am workers agreed to earn a denarius, which is about a day's wage. So, for the sake of accounting, let's fictionally say that the going rate for a denarius is \$120 or \$10/per hour. This is their expectation, nothing insane, but a good day's work for a good day's wage.

The 5pm workers, the ones who waited around all day without receiving any pay were not expecting much. And they certainly knew and assumed that working for one hour wasn't going to yield much pay. Let's continue working with our \$10 per hour rate and assume that they expected something around \$10. The 5pm workers grabbed their envelopes, open it up and finds a denarius. And they are ecstatic! The pay wasn't \$10, but it ended up being \$120.

They are shocked to find a full day's wages because that certainly is far more generous than they could have imagined. As the 6am workers came to receive their pay they had found out about the extreme pay rate and all of a sudden, they begin to crunch some numbers in their head. They figure out the landowner doesn't pay \$10 per hour but \$120 per hour.

Which means their new altered expectation is that they would receive \$1440!

You can imagine their excitement! These are day laborers. They are largely living hand to mouth, needy and desperate for each day's wages. So, the prospect of bringing in such a loot is invigorating.

"But each one of them received a denarius..."

The same amount of money as the 5pm workers. And what happens now is what most of us would call "righteous indignation." Because if we are truly honest, we would respond the same way. "It's not fair!" They were ticked, furious that they were paid the same rate as the 5pm workers. But notice their complaint.

"When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the world and the heat of the day.'" Matthew 20.11-12

They began to grumble against the landowner. They couldn't understand the injustice of the landowner. The 6am workers gather together, and they start to formulate their speech/rant for the landowner. They rushed over to him, and they began to lay into him. This is the crux of their argument, "You have made them equal to us..." There was an inherent "us vs. them" mentality that rose up within them.

We were to be the elected. We were to be the ones of prestige. We were to be the ones of most value and most power. You made THEM the same as us. And again, I just want to point out that at least in my own life, I am sympathetic to their cause because quite frankly, it is unfair. They had worked longer, harder hours and from the perspective of capitalism from our worldview, they deserved to get more. But the landowner had his response primed and ready to go. He responded:

"I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Matthew 20.13-15

Now let's think carefully about this right here. The weight and thrust of this story is right here in the landowner's response and not in the 5pm workers receiving their unexpected reward. Although that aspect and allegorizing of the story is right and proper as well. But the weight of the story is right here in the sharp and swift critique of the 6am workers. We really want to read this story and leave it at the level of us being the 5pm workers who receive the gracious gift of the landowner and how beautiful that is, And yes, that is beautiful. But these were the type of stories that got Jesus run out of town, and his life threatened. And no one gets run out of town, and their life threatened for being outrageously generous.

We can get a little uncomfortable with this aggressive response from God, but let's contextualize this text in the section of Matthew we are currently in.

Children and the Kingdom of God

Children as of little power, weak, vulnerable...They are the ones entering the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 19.16-29 - The Rich Young Ruler

The wealthy, the powerful, the self-sufficient, the high end of society..." How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 19.30-20.16 - First will be last, and last will be first. A reversal of our thinking about who is in and who is out.

Matthew 20.17-19 - Prediction of death. Death doesn't win, resurrection wins

Matthew 20.20-28 - James and John's mommy ask for her kids to sit at their right hand. Desire for power, prestige, authority. "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave..."

What is most disorienting about this story, is that the landowner is furious with the response of his best workers, the Gam crowd! And then Jesus, after having completely flipped our understanding of privilege and how the operation of the world works, drops this once more,

**"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."
Matthew 20.16**

If we reduce the parables to mere pithy stories with moralizing ends, then this quickly becomes a trite story about humility. And about how we should be careful to hold the door open for others and think of ourselves less. Don't be too hurried and try to find ways to be last and let others go first. This is all well and good. But again, no one gets run out of town and killed for teaching things like this. There must be something greater going on.

So what is it? What is so disorienting and startling about this type of grace? Remember, Jesus, when he says "first will be last, and the last will be first" he is saying this to religious Jews in his day. What is he suggesting by this story?

God is bringing new people with equal benefits into the Kingdom of God. What Jesus is doing here is radically widening the circle of who we perceive may share in the blessing. And for the religious leaders of their day, this would have been incredibly offensive!

The most offensive aspect of all of Jesus' ministry and teaching was his grace. Ridiculous, unmerited grace that always extended beyond what they were comfortable with. It was startling! Certainly, I don't want to nor will I judge anyone's salvation. But we also won't keep them out of the kingdom of heaven, because Jesus' teaching here is that they have at least as good a chance as you or I. Does this disturb you? Cause it probably should!

The Older Brother - Luke 15.28

"When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner..." - Matthew 20.16

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in..." - Luke 15.28

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Conclusion

Jesus looked at the crowd and said, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Church, may you be deeply offended by the grace of God this morning. May you come to recognize that whatever bookkeeping we do, whatever idea we have of the Kingdom of God, whatever preconceived notions of the in and the out, the powerful and the weak, the us vs. them, may you come to recognize that the grace of destabilizes it all. Because the grace of God is and will always be a disorienting reality in our lives.

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