

“The Evil Eye”

Our Lord was a great teller of folk-tales we call parables. This is one reason the New Testament says the common folk “heard him gladly,” for everyone loves a good story, especially one with a surprise ending. Again and again, Jesus employed the shock value of a tale with a twist in it to perk up his listener’s ears to kingdom truth. This proved good pedagogy, for these parables of his constantly provoked questions. Listeners asked, “whoever heard of that? Whatever on earth is the point? Wait a minute, maybe this is what he meant! Sure, that’s it.”

Now do you understand the pedagogy of the provoking parable? It made people think. A good story can be quite an asset – especially in teaching plain folk.

And Jesus’ stories were always told to answer a problem situation – never in formal worship services like this – and never just to entertain, though never dull.

For example, the “Parable of the Migrant Workers” was told to meet a situation involving Peter and a desert sheik. Jesus had just explained to some princeling, who was very rich and very young and very unhappy, that for him there would be no place in this life until he rid himself of the wealth that pandered to his pride. “Give away,” said Jesus, “everything that makes you feel so superior to your fellowman; give up anything in the Lord’s world that impels you to parade around as though you thought you were God, then you will be unencumbered to follow me and find yourself.” The young, rich sheik then said, predictably enough, “thanks, but no thanks,” and retired, rather depressed, to his sheikdom and his harem – but Peter had piped up, also predictable, as the Peck’s bad boy of the disciple band, “Look, Lord, what you just said for that young emir to do? Why, we’ve already done that. We long ago left all we had to follow you, given up everything, so what’s in it for us? What’s our reward? Pretty great, huh?”

“Peter,” said Jesus, in effect, “to live the kingdom life is, indeed, rewarding, for the good life, being humble and honest and kind and clean, full of good humor, has its hundredfold rewards, how many eternal compensations, for what little you’ve given up, but to keep you and the others from thinking you can earn the applause of God, and, by your good works, merit heaven falling at your feet because you deserve it, in short, to keep you disciples from being a new brand of Pharisees and thinking God owes you a lot, let me tell you lads a story.”

So he tells the disciples the “parable of the migrant workers (day laborers).”

The kingdom of heaven, he said, is like this owner of a vineyard, trying desperately to get his grapes harvested before the sirocco, (before that hot, September wind out of the desert), shrivels them up. So he keeps dashing back all day to the town square employment office, the labor pool, hiring anybody he can to come and help in the harvest. The wage he offers is higher than average, for he's in a terrible hurry to save his crop. No time now to haggle. And the men are all happy to "pull down," as workers say, so much more than they ever expected for a work day; and won't their wives be surprised? But at the end of the day the pay-boss – the owner – does something to spoil it all for those who worked full time. So glad is the owner to see the grapes all safe, that with a burst of more gratitude than business acumen, he pays every last jack of the men, no matter what time they came on the job, the same identical wage. Now, you would think, everyone should be happy, for the take-home pay of the whole work-force will be enough to make their wives give them a special hug and the children dance and sing.

But no, said Jesus, putting his usual twist on a story, no, that's not the way things turned out. Instead, the men who had whistled contentedly at their labor all day, looking forward to their unusually good pay, suddenly have changed expressions. They look with a "jaundiced eye" at those Johnnie-come-latelies who were hired almost at quittin' time, then got paid so much more than they deserved. They get a mean, hateful look in their eye, those who worked all day, resentful and jealous. They act very puerile, brattish, they throw their pay envelopes down in the dirt, whine and pout and have to be treated like children. The employer has to give them a verbal spanking (my Dad always said that's what sermons are: adult spankings!). He has to explain to the laborers that he can be generous if he wants to, and that they are just ruining what would have been a good day for everybody by their grudging. So they sullenly pick up their pay and go off fussing and fuming about "the principle of the thing" – and never do understand the owner's generosity to those men who, for no fault of their own, were hired late in the day, and who also had children at home to feed. Since everybody received more than they expected or deserved, why deny good fortune to the few who had to wait so late for their start? Well, jealousy, resentment, has spoiled more than one person's otherwise happy work-day. Envy makes the eye jaundiced.

If you don't think so, just look in the mirror some day when you are resentful at another's success – especially when you think he doesn't really deserve it, at least not nearly so much as yourself. If you want to see a jaundiced eye, look in the mirror and say: "Why should he get

promoted or get all the credit – when I’ve done all the work? What’s she got that I haven’t got? And she gets invited to the ...? Or, I studied harder than he did, and he made a better grade – if that guy can make the team, why can’t I? No fairness in this world... Or Why does that family get all the breaks when we’re so much better in every way? Or, how can common, ordinary riffraff like that...? Come to town so recently... just because they’ve made a little...” and etcetera, etcetera, and etcetera. When one says things like that into the mirror, the sight is scarcely becoming. The soul is out of joint – the eye jaundiced – the look is strictly sickly. One has spoiled what might otherwise have been a happy day’s work – it will make you sick.

Well, as we said at the beginning, Jesus’ story-sermons, his parables, always have one main point, just one, and the point of this one –

Whether for a 1st century Pharisee jealous over late-arrival Gentiles inheriting the love of God without the work of the Law –

Or for Peter and the other original disciples expecting special rewards because they came first –

Or for 20th century Christians thinking we merit more protection and prosperity from Providence because we’ve gone to church all our life, and been so good for goodness knows how long, and ought to rate higher in the kingdom than certain Publicans we can name –

For one and all with the eye of envy – the point is perfectly clear: namely, that God has his own way of appraising our various efforts, and his own way of rewarding them – so you and I better leave that where it belongs: leave it up to God.

We better keep a healthy eye on our own work, on our own life – be eternally gratefully for what our labor brings us – for most of us have already received from this life far more than we ever dreamed we would – and all of us have come by a great deal more than we deserved – so it’s rather silly to spoil a day in resentment that someone else may have gotten more than his just desserts.

Therefore, when we get to feeling sorry for ourselves because we think others have it so much easier – or so much better than we do and don’t deserve it half so much, maybe we’d better hear the Owner of all life say to us: (“Mt. 20:15b”), “Are you going to be mean – because I have been generous?” @

Let us pray:

Keep us, O Lord, from forever counting our blessings and coming up short – comparing our rewards in this life with others, and making ourselves miserable thereby.

Help us instead to do our daily work the very best we can – and in the job itself find the joy.

For the Christ's sake, Amen.

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