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“God’s Economy of Love”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
September 21, 2014
Exodus 16:1–15; Matthew 20:1–15

Intro: Parables are great because they give us the chance
to wonder what the kingdom of heaven is like
and what the kingdom of heaven is not like.

Like bursts of wind on a blustery day,

they raise the fallen leaves and expose tree roots.

They rain down sticky gumballs from the sycamores

and raise up clouds of dust that make us blink.

In other words, they unsettle the old order, the status quo,

shake it out like a picnic blanket,

and lay down an alternative reality, a kingdom way of being in this world

that is governed, not by the rules of culture or society,

but by the economy of God’s love.

And we are invited to wonder: is this is the spot where we want to picnic, or not?

A parable is like a Bobby Flay throwdown:

two alternatives are laid before us, and an invitation is issued for us to choose.

Which is the best way to live out the one wild and precious life God has given us?

Listen to Jesus’ parable of the Workers in the Vineyard: **(Matthew 20:1-16)**

Jesus' parable strikes discord to our capitalistic ears at first,
unsettling our economic sense of order.

We think: *landowner, workers, billable hours, equitable time worked,
starting time, quitting time, settle up, pay up, game over.*

When we listen to the parable this way, we get hung up on the aspects of
pay, fairness, merit, hours logged, and deserved reward.

And then we begin to chafe like those early laborers in the vineyard
who grumble, much like the hungry Israelites in the wilderness,
and protest, much like the elder brother of the prodigal son,
at the landowner's and the Holy One's and the Father's disproportionate generosity.
How could they be so unjust in a world that claims to mete justice so fairly?

Or does it?

If Jesus is throwing down a challenge to justice, this one certainly is unsettling!
And so, I will throw down another parable alongside this one
and invite you to consider its implications and insights into kingdom life.

The baby had begun to crawl and to pull up.

We knew the day was coming when the old order of our world would be shaken up
and we would have to rearrange our furniture to make our house
a safe environment for our grandson.

So, on the Monday morning when our daughter called and said, "He's crawling!
And we're bringing him to see you this weekend!"

We knew that the clock was ticking.

No sooner had we ended that call, I began searching the net
for a practical piece of furniture that would raise our TV screen higher,
put the control units behind glass,
and collect all of the wiring in a sleeve behind the cabinet
in a way that they would be inaccessible to little fingers.

I found one modest, acceptable, do-it-yourself cabinet

and then a comparable piece on Amazon for \$175 less:

submit order, ship to billing address, expect in 3 days.

Hedge was out of town for the week, so my son, Andrew, and I

decided to put it together ourselves and surprise him when he returned,
before the baby arrived.

And when the very large box arrived via UPS, Andrew and I were very diligent

about laying out all of the pieces according to the instructions,

which were nicely labeled, A, B, C, D, etc.,

and about laying out all of the screws, hinges, tacks and connectors
before we began assembly.

The instructions assured us that only two people were required for “ease of assembly,”

and it had a little pictograph of two people shaking hands,

which is how you start out as two unskilled workers in the vineyard
with a great deal more goodwill and enthusiasm than experience.

After all, we could read, and most of the instructions were in the form of graphics,

so how hard could this be, really?!

And we had plenty of time until the weekend; we were still in the third

or fourth hour, and time was on our side.

Who couldn't get excited about learning so many new crossword words:

cam lock pin, cam lock, Allen key screw, Allen screw (by the way, who's [Allen](#))?)

So, to make a long story short, we put the whole thing together, piece by piece,

top to bottom, inserted the drawers, tacked on the back panels,

turned the cabinet around for the grand finale—

the attachment of the two glass doors—and couldn't get them to fit.

No matter how delicately we tried to attach the adjustable hinges to the doors,

we couldn't get them to open the right way.

And at this point, it was probably approaching the ninth hour,

which meant we were “hungry,” a combination of hungry and angry.

In other words, we didn't feel the ease of assembly, or like shaking hands, either.

At about the eleventh hour, my husband walked in from his trip
and found us totally despondent, low on both enthusiasm and goodwill.
The unexpected surprise was that we could not complete our task,
and the baby would be arriving the next day into a home fraught with danger.
So Hedge, the one most unfamiliar with the project, the 11th hour laborer,
picked up the instructions, looked at the cabinet from top to bottom,
from back to front, and from front to back,
and dispensed his wisdom like an oracle:
"I think you have put the back panels on the front!
If you'll take those off the front and move them to the back,
the doors and hinges should fit on the front where they are supposed to be."
Ahhhh... we had confused the back for the front and the front for the back!
So we made the suggested correctives, and voilà, the cabinet was complete,
the environment was secure. Bring on the baby!

Now, if you wanted to pay us for our labor, how would you determine our pay?
Andrew and I were part of the project from the beginning
and spent many hours sweating over the details of the pictograms
that were supposed to be easy.
Hedge was not part of the project at all, until the very end, the eleventh hour.
Yet with his contribution, his new eyes, we were able to see something so simple
that we had overlooked and could not figure out.
All of this was a labor of love... by all of us.

The object of our labor was to protect a precious child of God.
So which part of our labor was most valuable?
The third-hour task of laying out all of the parts and matching them to the
instructions, the sixth-hour part of securing piece to piece, side to side,
drawer to runner, top to sides?

The ninth-hour task of tacking on the back, of flexing the hinges
to see which way they opened, or not?

Or the eleventh-hour task of inviting a new person into our vineyard with new eyes,
exposing the error of our ways, and making amends;
of rejoicing when the task was complete,
of welcoming a child into a safe environment?

How do you put a dollar sign on a labor of love?

Whose contribution is of most value, if all contributed towards the same goal?

Human rights activist and poet, Carolyn Forché, has thought a great deal about
Martin Buber's concept of the encounter between "I" and "Thou"
as a narrowing of the distancing between self and other,
whether that other is God/Thou, or whether that other is other people/thou.

She says, "There's a wakening to consciousness simultaneously, a recognition,
[and] with that recognition comes

an awareness of one's inexhaustible obligation for the other.

This... is the realm of the sacred," she says.

(Forché, Carolyn. "Infinite Obligation to Other." *A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith*, ed. Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler, p. 15)

I like the way she defines the sacred as *one's inexhaustible obligation for the other!*

Perhaps this realm of the sacred, *this inexhaustible obligation for the other*,

is the kingdom where God, the landowner,

is concerned for the welfare of everyone,

and where human obligation is to resist the grumbling of self-interest

and, instead, grumble *for*, advocate *for* the common good of all.

I was moved on Promotion Sunday last month

when a family of three showed up at the church door

asking, reluctantly, if they could come in and have some breakfast, too.

They had come from the shelter next door, having missed breakfast there,
and wondered if we could share a little of ours with them.

We were in the midst of our roll call of teachers and classes, having finished
our games and introductions and opening prayers.

We were on time and on schedule for the morning, and in the process of
dispersing to our assigned classes for a few introductions before worship began.

We were at the eleventh hour of our FPC schedule,
with everything running like clockwork,
and this family could have been perceived as an interruption.

But one of you took them under wing, mother, father, and child,
brought them through the buffet line,
made sure they had enough food for the morning,
sat with them while they ate, helped them pack extras for the day,
and then escorted them to the door when they were ready to leave.

They thanked us profusely, and their little girl thanked us
and told me again and again that she was seven years old.

They certainly were the last to arrive at our well-planned event, but you
invited them in and welcomed them as if they had been the first to arrive.

I could not have been more moved by the parable I saw unfolding in our midst:
this sacred moment of narrowing the distance between self and other,
this sacred moment of *inexhaustible obligation for the other*.

If Jesus is throwing down a challenge of inexhaustible obligation for others,
are we willing to accept the challenge, or will we let our grumbling
get in the way and create distance?

If the landowner, the hardest worker in the story, really, is willing to go out
in the heat of the day and invite, and invite, and invite again
people to come and work, regardless of their skill set,
will we resent the landowner's lack of assessment and order of invitation?

If the landowner wants everyone to be employed in the kingdom realm,
who are we to impose questions of when, and how much
when all the landowner asks is: "Who is willing to come?"

Jesus says, For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who invites
everyone to participate in his labor of love and rewards *everyone* who
responds positively, and graciously.

No experience is necessary, only a willingness to "say yes":
yes with your mouth, and yes with your head, and yes with your actions
in response to his open invitation.

Johnny-come-latelies are invited, as are late- bloomers.

Children, who have arrived "trailing clouds of glory...
from God, who is our home,"
as William Wordsworth would say (*Intimations of Immortality*),
come with fresh experience of the kingdom. Their gifts are priceless.

Our newest pastor and our newest members are invited,
who have new eyes for our church's way of doing and being.
Their gifts are like new wineskins for new wine.

Our LGBTQ friends are invited, who are fresh wind and fresh fire to a system
that has fenced them out for so long, and their gifts are valued.

Immigrant children, fleeing the danger and crime of their homeland, are invited,
regardless of their limited language or literacy skills.

Our neighbors from the streets are invited, who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
and they bring the gift of joy at being included.

Our God is gracious and generous, inviting and inviting, bestowing grace
and mercy on all, regardless of how deserving we might be or feel.

Our God invites unequivocally, saying: "Come, all who are thirsty,
come to the waters, and you who have no money, come, buy, and eat!
Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost..."

Listen, listen, to me and eat what is good

and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live" (Isaiah 55:1-3a).

Amen.