

God's Bias

November 26, 2017

We very often start with a bias. My bias when I went to see Mel Gibson's "*Passion of the Christ*" was that I was sure that I was not going to be swayed by that movie. I knew that I was not going to like it. And knowing that, I can confess to you that the font that he used in the opening credits already drove me batty.

Similarly, my "big picture" nature helped me to figure out pretty early in life that when we're looking for advice, we often go to the people who are going to give us the advice that we want to hear. A young lesbian woman recently came to me for advice on how to talk to her evangelical friends. She didn't go to an evangelical pastor who may have had the words or the sway with those evangelical friends. She came to me because she knew that my bias would help her to be able to stay strong in who she is, that my bias would uphold where she internally knew that she was and needed to be.

Biases are not inherently wrong nor are they avoidable. A while back, a colleague told me of a study that was done with the American electorate. In the study people were told about a particular piece of legislation without being told the party affiliation by whom it had been proposed. They were asked whether it sounded like something that they would support or not. They would answer, and then they were told which party had proposed that legislation and asked yet again whether they supported it or not. When they were told which party sponsored the legislation, that swayed them vastly in the second asking, with people changing their support once they knew which party supported the measure.

And so the two reasons that I start out talking about bias today is that first, I would like you to try to suspend your bias about the Gospel text that I just read. But then I'd also like you to think about bias; a lot of the people that I talked with in preparation for worship today told me that they felt shamed by the way they had heard this text preached before. "If you don't use your talents, you're a disappointment to God, and God is going to throw you out." That is what has often been taught, and so I'm inviting you to try to suspend that bias and try to hear this text with fresh eyes.

The other reason I want to talk about bias today is because I think that that's what this text is actually about. Let's try a rereading, reimagining, this parable of the talents. A talent is something that was a unit of measurement in first century Palestine. Scholars vary between saying that it was somewhere between 22 and 40 pounds. Most say that it was somewhere around 33 pounds of gold or silver. At current exchange rates, that means that one talent was about 1.25 million dollars.

So the person who was given 10 talents was given about \$6.25 million, the other \$2.5 million, and the third \$1.25 million. It's often described as being something that is the equivalent of 6,000 days wages. And so in first century Palestine, even if you were working every single day, 365 days a year, that would be close to 16.5 years of wages that were gifted to these people.

Unlike the parables of the workers in the vineyard which we've been reading earlier this fall, this is not a story that starts out with their work and then talks with us about fairness and generosity.

Everything in this parable starts out as gift, as grace. It's pure and simple gift. God doesn't give because we've earned it in this parable. God simply gives.

The modern-ear questions, the unequal amounts that the master gives. Many think that the master is God and that God should give to each of us equally. But I counter that with that idea the God trusts us to the extent of our abilities. God trusts us to our capacity.

One of my parent's best lines when we were growing up, a parenting tactic that I did not appreciate at the time but that now I understand was truly brilliant, was they would say to us, "You are not your sister." One of us needed a lot more rules, a lot more structure. The other needed a lot more freedom and would have rebelled with so much structure. By saying to us that "You are not your sister," they were saying we are going to deal with you as an individual, not equally, but rather according to your capacity.

And so, too, it is with God. A friend of mine who is in recovery says that he starts each day before he gets out of bed praying, "Lord, please don't give me any more than my character can handle." What he's doing in that prayer is putting himself under the discipline of God.

All of this is a long way around the fact that this is one more of those passages in the Bible that modern ears just don't like. The third servant didn't squander the talent, didn't spend it on hard living, didn't hurt people. We listen to stories like the prodigal son, the wayward child who broke his father's heart by asking for the inheritance ahead of time, essentially saying to his father you are worth more to me dead than alive. We hear the story in which he is welcomed back with open arms and a fatted calf, but the one who doesn't invest is thrown out where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth?

Clearly there's more going on here. I would like to propose that this text hinges on the verse, "Now the one who had received the one talent came and said, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and I hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'" What if the real problem that the master had with the servant is not that he didn't invest well? What if the problem is who the servant understood the master to be? The tragedy in this story is that the servant was so convinced of his understanding of the master as a cruel, hard person that the servant was frozen by fear. The servant was so biased toward the preconceived notion about the master that even though the master had just given him \$1.25 million, he couldn't recognize that as gift, couldn't embrace the freedom and the grace that that gift carried with it. The bias here is that he doesn't see the master rightly, couldn't comprehend the master's graciousness.

Read this way, perhaps one moral of the story could be that you get the God that you imagine. The servants who see gift and grace and freedom get that, and multiplied, and are invited into the master's joy, whereas the servant who sees fear and punishment and severity gets exactly that.

In the weekly email on Friday, I asked you to think about what your biases are and to take some time as a spiritual exercise to think about how they shape your life. A church member wrote back to me thanking me for that timely note. He said that he's going into all-week meetings this coming week with a boss that he locked horns with before. He said that even this reminder that we carry bias with us will be a helpful tool in keeping an even head.

How often when we're in the midst of a difficult relationship do we find ourselves biased toward our expectations of how someone is going to act and what their behaviors mean? And don't forget that biases work for good, too. I think of Michael and Todd with Ellie who we baptized today: we're supposed to be biased toward our children, toward loving them through their flaws, through their awkwardness, loving them into the wholeness of their potential.

And so there are two steps that I would encourage us toward. The first is steeping ourselves in two of the most fundamental biases of God: one acknowledging that everything in this parable and everything in our lives, the very core of existence, is a gift. Second, I recommend aligning ourselves with God's biases. Throughout the scriptures, we see a God of liberation, a God who hears the cry of the poor, whose fundamental orientation is toward the downtrodden, the lowly, the lost, the forsaken, the widow, the orphan. Our bias, because we know we're going to have them, our bias needs to be toward justice, and mercy, toward inclusion, and health, toward the things that build reconciliation and peace. When we feel our hearts start to darken, our gut check needs to be to ask ourselves, "What would God's bias be?"

Friends, as we step out into our real and biased lives, my prayer is that our bias will be toward justice, that our vision will be one of courage, that our heart will be released from fear, and that we may all, therefore, enter into the master's joy. May it be so.

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