

God's Economy

September 24, 2017

It's been a hair-raising week yet again.

Along with natural disasters beyond Biblical proportions, healthcare has taken center stage again. Insurance companies, doctors, patients, hospitals and other patient-provider groups are rallying together against the Graham-Cassidy-Heller-Johnson plan, saying it could result in millions losing access to affordable health care and coverage. It's not often you see these interest groups align, but the latest repeal-and-replace effort has done just that.

If passed, the 51 % of non-elderly Americans who have preexisting conditions will now be at the mercy of insurance companies who will have the ability to drop them or raise rates exorbitantly. The bill disproportionately affects women, allowing insurance companies to deny pregnancy and maternal care as well as reproductive health services. But perhaps the most immoral facets of the bill lie in what it will do to Medicare, the system we have in place to take care of the most vulnerable among us.

In the midst of that, the lectionary suggests that we worship with the passage from Matthew's Gospel we read today, a passage in which Jesus talks about the reign of God not being fair. Who needs Jesus to tell us that the world isn't fair? If the hurricanes and healthcare repeal hasn't taught us that, it is only because the reality that life is not fair is something we have learned through infinite lessons already. From the school yard to the board room, we have all seen bullies get rewarded and scoundrels take the day. In today's scriptures, to the bullies, the scoundrels, and even the whiners, God says, I love you. Matthew 20 confronts us with the prospect that fairness is not God's only priority. God *wants* justice. God *is* compassionate.

Think about it. There have been times when each and every one of us would have preferred that the world not be fair. Have you ever sped past a police officer, and sighed, "Thank God!" when you looked in the rear view mirror and did not see flashing lights? Have you ever accidentally said something in front of the kids, and then heaved a sigh of relief when they didn't seem to hear? Have you ever felt that heart expanding gratitude of being forgiven for something you did wrong? We want the world to work fairly; we want it to work on the principle of justice...except when we don't.

During my last year of seminary, two experiences that book-ended my final practicum brought into stark relief the complex reality that fairness or justice is not always the highest good. My practicum was to serve as chaplain of a small Christian residence hall at the University of Illinois at Chicago's medical center campus. At the beginning of the year, one of our most dynamic residents noticed that she was becoming lethargic. Having always been highly energetic, she realized quickly that something was wrong. She visited the health center, had a number of tests, and then withdrew from school. Though she had always lived a healthy lifestyle, it was only a matter of months before the acute lymphogenic leukemia took her life. That winter, the prayers and the questions of the residents centered around, "why," and "it's not fair."

That spring, her former roommate confided in me that she now had some health concerns of her own. On several different occasions that winter, she had gone to parties and gotten wildly drunk to numb the pain. A couple of times, she had gone home with random people, and now she was afraid. She was late, and she was well informed enough to be worried about STDs and AIDS as well as pregnancy. As we walked to the same health center where her roommate had been diagnosed months before, this time we were both hoping that cause would not equal effect, that despite her risky behavior, she might not have to pay the consequences. When the tests came back a short time later, we were both relieved that, sometimes, things aren't fair. In theological terms, she received mercy, and if she allowed herself to be transformed by this experience, she may have even received grace.

After having *lamented* that life wasn't fair when her roommate died, we now *rejoiced* that life was not fair in her own clean bill of health. To be sure, our God IS the God of fairness and justice, but our God is also the God of mercy, grace, forgiveness, healing, and compassion.

Years ago, I learned this way to parallel these concepts of justice, mercy, and grace: When we receive justice we get what we deserve – we do this, and that happens. When we receive mercy we do not get what we deserve – we do something, and somehow we are NOT held accountable for it. When we receive grace we get what we do not deserve – we receive God's transforming love not because of what we do, but simply because God is so truly wonderful. This parallelism is not meant to imply that we do not deserve grace, but rather that God's offer of grace is not predicated on us or our actions, rather it is wholly and completely a gift.

In Matthew 20, Jesus is talking about grace, generosity, and abundance, but the workers who were hired early in the day want justice, rules, and rigidity. They grumble because God is good, albeit to someone else. This exchange is even richer in the original Greek than it is in most English translations. The Greek reads, “is **your** eye evil because **I** am God?” From a literary point of view, this gospel passage has two hinges: the doors to our hearts and minds are meant to open once as we grasp that God is bigger than mere fairness, and then they are to open yet again when we see the hubris of resenting God's goodness to others.

What Jesus was doing with this parable was expanding people's concepts of God to include the extravagance of grace, and then moving them to understand that everyone, especially the little people, especially those on the fringes like the people who would show up looking for work at 5 p.m., are just as valuable in the divine economy as those who put in their full day.

What does this say to our own Senator Johnson and the rest of our policy makers? It says that, as important as it is to make good on campaign promises, our God is just as interested in doing right by the least among us. God's accounting system is very different than the one at work on the Senate floor this week, and for that, we are grateful.

In this year of healthcare repeal, this Gospel passage has two implications that should get into our hearts. First, if we begrudge others the grace they receive, we need to do some honest face time with God. Our God has enough, is bigger, loves so completely, that someone else's experience of grace has no bearing on our own, there is plenty of grace to go around, and we cannot begrudge God's generosity. Instead of resenting the gifts others receive, let's make a conscious effort to pray that they use their gifts well, to the greater glory of God.

Second, we can allow this passage to be so integrated into our lives that we allow it to transform our way of being. What if we were to act like God, extravagantly generous, seeing in others that ALL are worthy, not just those who are best and hired first. What if we were to take care of the needy, employing and healing not just those who are most able bodied, but those who get to the hiring square late in the day because they are taking care of a sick loved one or even because of a fault of their own. What if, at the end of a hard day, instead of nickel and dime-ing those around us – our kids as they want our time, the difficult customer service reps on the phone, our church committees, our prayer lives – what if we were to shower everyone we encounter, whether they “deserve” it or not, with extravagant generosity, with our time, our understanding, our compassion, our resources? What then?

That late, great saint of the UCC, William Sloane Coffin, is quoted as having said, “We've gotten to a point in our country where we believe that the needy are greedy and the greedy are needy.” What if we join God in turning that on its head?

Friends, I do not know what kind of a healthcare bill Jesus would have written, but I do know that Jesus would have offered everyone transforming grace. Thanks be to God.

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