

A husband and wife were at a park standing in front of a wishing well. The wife decided she would make a wish and threw a quarter in the well. The husband wanted to, but he hated to just throw a quarter away. He kept leaning over the well holding onto the quarter. Then he slipped and fell into the well. The wife turned away from the well and said, "Wow, I didn't know they worked that fast!"

First, some background on this strange gospel text. The key to understanding it is found in the first reading: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." (Is 55:6-9) God always surprises us. Not by His justice, but by His mercy. Sometimes His mercy even scandalizes us, as in today's Gospel. The master's generosity overpaid the workers who worked only for an hour, without underpaying the others, but those others were resentful and envious. We sympathize with them. We all tend to be envious of those who had it easier than we did. I just heard it the other day from someone who struggled to pay off all of his college loans: "I paid MY loans off – they should have to pay theirs too!" This parable tells us that either God is not fair at all or, at least for Him, fairness has to take second place to generosity. We should be distrustful of that instinctive reaction of ours. We value equality, but we need to be sure that our passion for equality is not a disguise for envy. Envy is the stupidest of all sins, because it never gives you one second of joy. Generosity is more important than equality, because generosity is part of love and equality is only part of justice, and love is more important than justice. One of the things Mother Teresa loved to say the most was that "God cannot be outdone in generosity." That is one of the ways in which His ways and thoughts are as high above ours as the heavens are above the earth; so high that it shocks us.

This does not mean that God's ways are not good or are "beyond good and evil." All His ways are good. And it does not mean that His thoughts are not true or that truth is not eternal, universal, objective, and unchangeable. "That may be true for you but not for me" is beyond stupid; it is totally meaningless. It's like saying, "2 plus 2 are 4 in your universe but not in mine." What it means to say that God's thoughts are as far above our thoughts as the heavens are far above the earth is that our best thoughts, the truths we know, are, compared with God's thoughts, are pretty small. Our thoughts are closer to the thoughts of cats or dogs than they are to the thoughts of God, because the distance between any 2 finite things like humans and cats or dogs is only finite, while the distance between anything finite and infinite is infinite. So if you feel insulted by being compared to cats and dogs, I apologize. To the cats and dogs! It's like the joke: "Politicians are crooks!" "Take that back! I am deeply insulted!" "Why? Are you a politician?" "No, I'm a crook."

In today's gospel, Jesus shows us one of the many ways in which God's goodness is far greater than ours. The summit of goodness is love, but the foundation of goodness is justice. Love is goodness' maximum; justice is goodness' minimum. And God is JUST as well as LOVE. But God's justice transcends ours as much as God Himself transcends us and as much as heaven transcends earth. (adapted from Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, p. 671-678)

Second, the problem – is envy. To the envious workers who worked all day for their pay, it looked unjust for the master to give the workers who worked only an hour the same pay. It looked like giving criminals the same freedoms and rights as non-criminals, or students who did not pass the exam the same grade as those who did pass. But that is an illusion created by envy.

All sins blind the reason and create illusions. The all day workers suddenly are blind to the fact that they were paid fairly for a day's work. Envy says that those who work less should deserve less. Says who? And it was a DAY's wage – barely enough for a family to survive on. The master's generosity meant that the

families whose father (sorry it would only have been the males) only worked an hour or so would be able to eat that night.

Going beyond justice to mercy is not less than justice – but more. God’s grace goes beyond justice to everybody, because none of us deserve heaven. The one thing that we all have in common, the one thing that unites us even though we are all different in virtues and vices and age and race and gender and intelligence – is sin.

So God gives us ALL more than we deserve. None of us deserved to be created in the first place, because someone who doesn’t yet exist can’t deserve anything, not even to exist. The workers in Jesus’ parable didn’t create these jobs; the master did. (Kreeft, p. 679)

Our envy comes from our sense of entitlement. As Americans, we have a huge sense of entitlement, especially if we grew up rather comfortable. When we grow up comfortable, we think we DESERVE. We think we have a special right. We would be offended if we didn’t get our bonus or our raise. We all think we deserve just a bit MORE; this really creates a high degree of unhappiness and anger in our society. Of course, Jesus always turns everything on its head, ending with the punch line: “Those that you think are the last might well be first” (Mt 20:16) We’d better be ready to be surprised. The way most of us measure things – especially if we are privileged and comfortable – demonstrates that we might in fact not love God at all, but just ourselves.

There’s only one way to get out of this meritocracy and entitlement. Once in our lives, we have to experience undeserved love at a deep, gut level. Where we didn’t merit it, we weren’t worthy of it; in fact we were unworthy of it, and we got it anyway. This is what makes the 12 step programs so powerful in prodding people into deeper maturity and holiness – they honestly realize that it’s all gift that they are still alive, that God forgives them and often family members and spouses have forgiven them as well. And it gives them a whole new life. That’s mercy. Only the experience of divine mercy breaks down our entire way of counting. And that’s what we do – we’re all COUNTERS! We are! We think to ourselves, ‘You gave this much, so you deserve this much.’”

Every such expectation is a resentment waiting to happen. When we expect, we’re soon going to resent it when we don’t get what we think we deserve. So, what the Gospel says is “Stop expecting!” Entitlement is lethal for the soul. EVERYTHING IS A GIFT! – one hundred percent pure gift! And so, the only real prayer is to say “Thank you!” and to keep saying it. I’m always amazed that folks are so anxious to get out of church so fast. Could we ever stop telling God thanks for all that we have? But we’re more interested in running to our cars to be first in line at Duncan Donuts. BECAUSE WE THINK WE DESERVE TO BE FIRST IN LINE—and more clever than those fools who stayed to sing the closing song! They are missing the gospel by a mile! Only when we stop counting and figuring out what we deserve, will we move from the world of merit into the wonderful world of grace. And in the world of grace, everything is free. And we live in this world ONLY by the grace, the gift – of God. (adapted from Richard Rohr, WHO DESERVES ANYTHING? Homily, September 21, 2014)

A story to conclude. Dr. Oliver Sacks was a physician, best-selling author and professor of neurology at the New York University School of Medicine. He did ground-breaking work in removing the stigma of mental neurological illness and developing a humane approach to treating psychiatric issues. His best selling book AWAKENINGS, was made into an Oscar-nominated film starring Robert DeNiro and Robin Williams.

In 2004, Dr. Sacks was found to have a rare tumor in his eye, an ocular melanoma. The cancer metastasized and spread to his liver; Dr. Sacks died 10 years later. He chronicled his final years in a book titled GRATITUDE and in essays published in THE NEW YORK TIMES. In a piece published in THE TIMES 6 months before his death in 2015, Dr. Sacks, then 81, reflected on his life with gratitude:

“I feel grateful that I have been granted 9 years of good health and productivity since the original diagnosis, but now I am face to face with dying....It is up to me now to choose how to live out the months that remain to me. I have to live in the richest, deepest, most productive way I can....Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. This does not mean I am finished with life. On the contrary, I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight. I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude.”

“To see my life from a great altitude” – that’s what Jesus asks us to do in the parable of the generous landowner; to see our lives as more than just our wants and needs and not obsess over our disappointments and resentments or give into jadedness and cynicism, but to realize the many reasons we have to be grateful – most not deserved or merited save for the constant and complete love of our Creator. May we see our lives “from a great altitude,” looking beyond what we don’t have -- and realize and rejoice in all that we have been given. Amen. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, 24 September 2023)