

Unruly Grace

From the series: Stories Jesus Told

Matthew 20: 1-16

Richard A. Rhem

Lakeshore Interfaith Community, Mother's Trust

Ganges, Michigan

October 28, 2007

My theme these three presentations has been *Stories Jesus Told* with the purpose of discovering what the stories reflect about the nature of God. Parables should be heard to catch their major point and should not be pressed in all their details. I think in the stories I've chosen it is faithful to the heart of the stories/parables to read off from them Jesus' understanding of the mystery of God and that has been the focus of my study of these stories.

The nature of God as it comes to expression in the stories Jesus told – that has been my purpose. In doing so I reflect as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus, the way of Jesus. But I've enjoyed doing it so much in this setting – an interfaith gathering place where we seek to be true to our respective faith traditions but have opportunity to be enriched by other traditions and the unique insights and perspectives each brings.

In my previous two discussions and again this morning I am inviting you to reflect with me on the Nature of the Sacred Mystery – Jesus being the stimulus, the catalyst, but not so much to instruct you in the Christian understanding as to invite you to reflect with me on the mystery we will never fathom. When we speak of God as Mystery, we use the term not as a mystery novel where finally the mystery is unraveled or solved. God as mystery indicates a reality beyond our human capacity to comprehend. That is not an obvious truth. Given all the words we speak, all the sermons preached, all the volumes written – one might get the impression we know a great deal about God. We preachers are probably the greatest deniers of God as Mystery – we often give the impression that we are quite well informed as to the nature of the Mystery that is God, but that is a false impression. Whether dogmatically orthodox or radically liberal, whether Christian or Muslim or Jewish, whether Buddhist, Hindu or Jain – all God talk is a probing of a mystery that cannot be fully grasped – at best a relative apprehension of the Ultimate – and that of course is why the exclusive claims to the faith, for example, of a Christian tradition are both arrogant and ignorant. And yet the massive human endeavor we speak of as religion/ the religious quest/ religious observance/ religious behavior – witnesses to the manifestation of the Sacred Mystery in our human experience. There is, I believe, an insatiable hunger

and thirst for communion and/or union with God, with the Mystery that is the origin, ground and goal of all that is.

Certainly there are those who deny that to be the case for themselves and there are those who write the religious quest off as a carryover from the age of superstition that, for thinking folk, is being replaced by critical rationality and scientific endeavor. But the religious sense of awe and wonder remains for the vast majority of humankind even when the critical faculties are engaged.

Why is reflection on the nature of the sacred mystery important? Beyond the fact that it seems simply part of being human to wonder about the nature of God, I would suggest such a quest is important because human behavior tends to reflect the image of God one carries in one's being – one's mind and heart. We tend to emulate the Ultimate Reality we conceive. We reflect our understanding of the nature of God or of reality in our behavior – in our attitudes and actions.

I am a Christian first of all because I was born into a Christian family and tradition. Over a long pilgrimage I have come to see my tradition in the context of the great religions. I affirm my Christian faith but not uncritically. I reject any claim to absolute revealed truth or exclusive claim to the mediation of God's salvation. The dimension of the Christian tradition – the New Testament particularly – that I find most profound is the claim of the Incarnation – God in the human – specifically in the humanity of Jesus, but not only in Jesus – rather the human becoming of God and thus the God embodied in the human, again in Jesus for Christian faith. In the face of Jesus I see the heart of God. In his total life, in his words and deeds, I see God revealed. I chose the way of Jesus as the path I would follow – always poorly – and, in these Sunday mornings, as an invitation to reflect on the Nature of God.

So let me return to my purpose after that lengthy parenthesis – I am inviting you to reflect with me on the nature of God and, I can even say, the Nature of Reality, from the understanding of Jesus as it comes to expression in the stories he told.

The first story – The Prodigal Son, which I suggested was really a story about the Prodigal Love of the Father where salty tears drowned out a returning son's carefully crafted speech of apology and request –

God/Reality as Prodigal Love.

And then the second story of the woman of the night who entered the Pharisee's dinner party and wept over Jesus' feet, evidence that at some point he had touched her life, accorded her human dignity and a sense of worth. She was transformed by love and loved in return – transforming love. For the story Jesus told of two debtors who had nothing to pay and were freely forgiven – Jesus asked the Pharisee, Simon, which one would love most and he said rightly, the one who was forgiven most –

Transforming Love.

We turn now to the third story which I am entitling “Unruly Grace”. Grace is simply love in action. Jesus’ stories have portrayed the nature of God as love and that love moving out to the world to a person, a community, is Grace. The prosaic definition we often use is “undeserved favor” – but I like “love in action”.

And love in action is unruly. I like that word in this connection – it is a surprising combination – unruly usually carries a negative connotation – an unruly child, an unruly guest, etc. – one not playing by the rules: rules of fairness, rules of contracts, rules that structured social relations.

That is what today’s story is about. Matthew 20:1-16 is a story Jesus used to make the point of the startling statement in the previous chapter that human salvation was an impossible human achievement:

The rich young man – What do I lack? Sell all...

Disciples: “Who can be saved?”

Human impossibility – But with God (only with God), salvation is possible because it is Gift.

The Parable: Matthew 20:1-16

A landowner hires workers to work his fields. It is 6:00 a.m. They contract – a day’s wage for a day’s labor. But he needs more workers and so returns to the “unemployed laborer pool” at 9:00, noon, 3:00 and 5:00 p.m., each time finding laborers looking for work and sending them to his fields without contract, assuring them only to pay whatever was right. When evening arrived the workers returned for their pay. The landowner instructed his manager to pay them all a day’s wage beginning with those hired last. When those hired first – at 6:00 a.m. – got a day’s wage – as they had agreed when they were hired –, they grumbled because those who came later got the same amount. They protested, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

Their complaint wasn’t that those hired at 5:00 p.m. got a day’s wage but only that they didn’t receive more – “you made them equal to us!”

If, before you hear this story in terms of God as the householder and you take it as a human story, with whom do you identify? Don’t you tend to join the first hires in their grumbling? It isn’t fair after all. Is not the mantra of the women’s movement, equal pay for equal work, relevant? Isn’t there something that offends our sense of justice?

But think about it...

Take the householder's final word: "Are you envious because I'm generous?" It was the generosity of the householder that the workers resented. He had fulfilled his word. The contract mutually agreed on was honored. But those whose contract was fulfilled were offended by the householder's grace.

And this surprising fact has profound relevance for religious understanding, observance, practice.

Again, remember the context – Who can be saved? Jesus' answer: No one through human effort of whatever kind
Religion based on the
Performance Principle
Does not save, does not achieve
Peace with God.

In my particular faith family background this is Reformation Sunday, the last Sunday in October. Martin Luther in 1517 nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, protesting the practices of his Roman Catholic Church that had a full set of observances, practices, and requirements through which the church mediated God's saving grace, and in the 16th century the system had become very corrupt.

Luther was one of those persons who suffered from an accusing conscience – He found no peace, try as he may, punish and pummel himself as he did. In anguish he performed and performed and performed some more. Going to his Confessor, the Confessor said, "Martin, you must love God", to which Luther responded, "Love God? I hate God!"

The agony of Luther has been played out again and again, over and over.

There is that about us human beings that wonders about God, desires peace, union, communion with God. Whatever the roots of religion in the human are – fear, guilt, wonder, intuitive sense of the sacred – there is the felt need to be put right with God or the Ultimate Order of the Universe. And it just seems natural that we must find a way to achieve that being right with God.

And there is the rub –
We can't achieve it.
We don't need to achieve it.

It is given fully by a gracious God – Who plays by no rules – *Unruly Grace* you see!

The nature of the Sacred Mystery, of God, of the Real is Love expressed as Grace for creation and all creation's children.

Isn't that quite amazing when you think of all the religions and all the religious observances and practices?

Isn't it just human/quite natural to assume on the basis of being right with the Universe, with the Ultimate, with God would be some sort of performance? And has not the institutional form of the respective religions reinforced that natural tendency -

What do I lack?

What must I do?

And the institutional religions are on guard against any suggestion that there is a Grace that transcends them all, with nothing to do.

I found that out...

The RCA Minister of Evangelism was scandalized and very critical of my suggestion of universal Grace. He said, "If that's true, I might as well sell used cars."

The Prodigal's well-rehearsed speech about what he would do to earn a bunk in the servants' quarters was simply drowned out by the father's loving embrace.

The two debtors of Jesus' story in Luke 7, both owing different amounts, both had nothing to pay and were both fully forgiven.

And in this story the first hires are given their due while all the rest are simply graced by the householder's generosity.

Kristen Stendahl suggests Matthew was writing to a Jewish-Jesus community that was beginning to receive non-Jews – Gentiles – into the community and how would they be received? As second-rate Christians?

You mean, some must have said, that we who are the products of generations of faithful covenant membership have no advantage over these Gentiles coming in out of pagan darkness?

Jesus' story says – That's right because nobody earns salvation – there is no performance principle, no merit system. God's unruly grace relativizes all human observance/ practice/ behavior.

Well, then why do we engage in religious observance? Hopefully because we find meaning and fulfillment in that observance. Hopefully our religious practice is an end in itself giving wisdom, insight, peace and joy and the experience of being in the Presence of the Holy. And for some of us the experience of community – community where our best selves are confirmed and encouraged, where our

insights are tested and our horizons broadened – a community where compassion finds expression and serving finds opportunity.

Once we are touched by Grace, transformed by Grace, all coercive, obsessive religion evaporates and we are transformed. In a beautiful writing by Paul Tillich, “You are accepted”, I find this expressed:

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying, “You are accepted. You are accepted.” Accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now. Perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything. Do not perform anything. Do not intend anything. Simple accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us, we experience grace.

Salvation – do we need to be saved?

That word has much baggage with it and is used so differently.

Do we need to be saved?

Yes, if salvation is understood as its root suggests – as healing.

We bring as much baggage with us ourselves and most of us manage to mess up our lives at some point – and then, trying harder doesn’t really help. Finally there is nothing we can do.

But the Word of Grace is healing – that is salvation – issuing in peace and joy.

So is the universe/ ultimate reality full of Grace? This is the understanding of Jesus according to the stories he told – In a word, he said God is like that...

And if I hear that and trust that and entrust myself to such a Reality, such a Sacred Mystery, I will act in kind, and if all who would encounter such Grace were to act it out would we not create the reality we trust in, the reality we live.

All religious traditions have their own take on this and I’m not knowledgeable as to how such Unruly Grace would translate in other religious traditions but this is what I find in Jesus and that’s why I chose to follow his way – poorly to be sure – but seriously.