

“Going God’s Way?”

Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

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When we pray that part of the Lord’s Prayer, “*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*” what do we expect will happen? When things go God’s way, what’s it like? Who hasn’t asked this question? In fact, it’s a question that brought many of us to church to begin with.

When things go God’s way, it looks like the courageous rescues by fire fighters, police officers, National Guard soldiers, military and civilian pilots and just ordinary civilians in the wake of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Jose. With Hurricane Maria looming and possibly finding landfall here, it is good to remember Jesus’ words: “*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” (John 15:13) We saw that divine love and courage lived by otherwise ordinary human beings time after time in recent weeks.

When things go God’s way, it looks like churches that serve food to hungry people....and people that live their love in walks and runs to alleviate all manner of human suffering: cancer, ALS, Parkinson’s, suicide. When things go God’s way there is food, clothing and shelter for all. When things go God’s way, folks are generous and share.

When things go God’s way. That’s that point of this parable from Matthew. Like many other of Jesus’ parables, it begins “*The kingdom of heaven is like....*” It’s the same as saying “*When things go God’s way, it will be paradise!*”

Recall what we know of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. When things go God’s way, nobody will be sick. Jesus healed many people: the lepers, the paralyzed man, the woman bent over and Peter’s mother-in-law. When things go God’s way,

scripture tells us, “there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” (Rev. 21:4b) Jesus raised from the dead Lazarus, and the son of the widow of Nain, and Jairus’ little daughter. When things go God’s way, everyone will be treated fairly. Jesus took the side of the underdog, choosing fishers and laborers as disciples, not society leaders nor industry captains. He defended the woman caught in adultery and accepted the woman at the well who had many husbands. He ate with outcasts and sinners. When things finally go God’s way, people will be valued for what’s in their hearts.

Yes, sir! Yes, ma’am! When things finally go God’s way, it will be paradise.

Did you notice what happened there, what I did with words and you may have done with thoughts as we considered things going God’s way? We push it all off into the future. We betray ourselves. We do not really expect things to go God’s way NOW. Who knows why? Perhaps we’re too world weary; or we’ve prayed hard but seemingly without effect; or we’ve been hurt too deeply; or seen too much of greed and violence and death. So we become “realists.” Idealism is fine for youth and dreamers...and preachers. Things going God’s way would be nice, but we’ll have to wait until the end of the age.

As realists, we know the first part of Jesus’ parable got it exactly right. There are those who are first and those who are last. Jesus sure got that right. It’s sad, and often unfair, but that’s how it goes. There are some who are first. They are smart, or cunning, or ruthless. They hustle or start with an advantage or are lucky or happen to be in the right place at the right time. One of the things I have learned in building bridges across racial divisions is that I automatically have an advance start. Our society has enough discrimination toward people of

color, women, the elderly, gay and lesbian folk and people with handicapping conditions that, as a straight, white man, I automatically have an advantage in social, economic and political situations. Notice I didn't say "a young straight, white man." Drat!

It's not right, of course. In fact, it's a stench in the nostrils of God. But that's how it is. Until I accepted my advantage, an advantage I didn't earn, it was difficult for me to hear the pain of sisters and brothers without those social advantages. Until I accepted that I had a leg up, I couldn't work to change it.

So some are first. And some are last. They start at a disadvantage with a physical, emotional or economic disadvantage, or are just plain unlucky or are in the wrong place. This is a terribly hard thing we learn.

And we learn it early. Years ago I saw this note, part of a Sunday School exercise where the children wrote notes to Jesus. Sixth-grader Amy wrote: *"Dear Jesus, I heard that you are a good teacher. Please be my teacher. I don't know how to spell and read good. Lots of people call me dumb. I am not dumb! I heard that you like everyone. It doesn't matter what they look like or how they act or how smart they are. Will you be my teacher? If you are, I will try to learn better. Your friend, Amy."*

Can we imagine that child's pain? Perhaps we can. Amy was always last: last to be chosen for school play or sports, last chosen to read, just last. She was sure she wasn't stupid but everyone treated her as though she was. It hurt. She said *"I was always the caboose and never the engine."* So the first part of the parable is exactly right. Somebody has to be last.

So it seems the second part of Jesus' parable can only happen in Paradise. After all, you can't expect part-time workers to get paid the same as full-time workers. It's not fair. It would encourage the worst of work habits: why work all day

if you get the same pay just for showing up? A business can't be run like this! It would fail in six months! Economics doesn't work like this and life doesn't work like this. There are first and last. The second part of Jesus' parable, we think, can at best be true of spiritual things and maybe only in paradise.

We have to remember, of course, that those hired first didn't have to spend all day worrying about whether or not they'd earn an income that day. They had the security of knowing that all would be well. And the parable doesn't say they were chosen because they were there first, or got up early, or were well-groomed or well-spoken. They were just chosen.

We have to remember, too, that some of our assumptions about what is possible may be small thinking. The national debate on health care draws us, if we are so inclined, to the interesting sub-set of companies who provide health benefits to part-time workers. Costco, Lowe's, Caribou Coffee, REI (the outdoor camping retailer), Starbucks, UPS and Whole Foods have found it makes business sense to do this.

Most of all, as we hear Jesus' parable of a full days wage paid to a worker in the last hour, we have to remember that every one of us, if we're honest, would not likely refuse the landowner's generosity. We would most likely say, "Thank you. THANK YOU!"

And that's the point. When things go God's way, amazing things happen, not only to others, but to us. It's called "grace" and it's about love and forgiveness and new beginnings that we all need. As the landowner observes at the end of the parable: *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

When things go God's way, we get over our envy and get over ourselves and get going God's way. Which is the very point of being here and being Christian. Going God's way?