

Divide and Conquer

Matthew 20:1-16 Phillipians 1:21-30 Exodus 16:2-15 Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

I am told this is one of Jesus' most provocative parables. So, as we dive in, we remember that Jesus knew what he meant, and we are still working at it ...

Jesus answers Peter's question from Matthew 19 27: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Peter wanted to know what reward would be given to those who gave up everything to follow Jesus. Jesus teaches.

The kingdom of heaven is like ... a mustard seed, a dragnet cast into the sea, a man about to go on a journey, ten virgins with lamps, a king who gave a wedding feast, a man who sowed good seed, a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves, AND a landowner who is hiring people to work in his vineyard.

What is Jesus working so eloquently to tell us? This Kingdom of Heaven is like... He never says it's like the Kingdom of some King, the Kingdom of Assyria, the Kingdom of Babylon ... or even the Kingdom of the excellent David. It's a different place entirely.

You see, the Kingdom of David ... or at least only a mere two Kings after David, with King Jeroboam ... the Kingdom fell apart and the people of God were divided, no longer a kingdom or a nation or even a family, which is how God began the plan for us, for all the people of God.

Jesus was worried about his people then and for his people today. Being divided is NOT the plan. Being ONE is God's plan for the world ... for the people of God, which is all the people.

How did this parable explain a Kingdom of division? What did this Kingdom of division look like in century one? How does it compare to the Kingdom of Heaven ... to God's Kingdom?

There was a division of struggle and loss between the 'have's and have nots.' One person owned land a vineyard, and had all kinds of people working for him ... a 'have.' Some people, day labourers, have-nots, many of whom may have one time been landowners, but the Roman debt system robbed them of their land, leaving them with no option for survival but to be day labourers, their survival at the whim of the new landowners.

DIVIDER NUMBER ONE ... the struggle of POWER OVER

Then, honour and shame ... Some have honour, and some only have shame, and, as we know, there is only so much honour ... limited supply of honour. Honour and Shame is the great teacher of THERE IS NOT ENOUGH. Does it EVER go away? The great divider. Is it only in the first century ... oh NO. Honour and Shame are alive and well in our very midst this very day, forcing on us ingrained CULTURAL TRUTH that there is a limited supply of that which is good.

DIVIDER NUMBER TWO ... There is not enough for everyone

The landowner asks, in verse 15, "... is your eye envious because I am generous?" The evil eye - envy on steroids.

Then, the Evil Eye ... envy is just inadequate. John Elliott has written a four-volume work on the evil eye because it is so very prevalent in many cultures, from 3000 BCE to about 600 CE in the Roman empire. From Elliott, (the evil eye) "is treated not as an instance of vulgar superstition or deluded magic, but as a physiological, psychological, and moral phenomenon whose operation was deemed explicable on rational grounds. It is actually more equitable to a CURSE... definitely provocative. In this case, not only are the workers being accused of wanting what is good, but of wanting what the landowner has, not wanting him to have it ... actually in some understandings of the power of the evil eye ... wanting the landowner dead. Because there is NOT enough, this is a grave accusation.

However, only the first labourers were accused of envy, this terrible 'evil eye.' Their attitude was similar to that of the Pharisees, who were incensed at Jesus' teaching that others could inherit a heavenly kingdom they thought was reserved for them alone. They despised Jesus for offering the kingdom to poor, oppressed, weak sinners whom He made equal to them.

DIVIDER NUMBER THREE ... SOME DESERVE, SOME DO NOT DESERVE.

The great dividers of humanity ... There is not enough for all; some people deserve, and others do not deserve scarcity, Greed, competition, and scrambling for power.

What are the Kingdom traits of our world?

The fourth cultural system described in this parable is Patronage. A patron is a wealthy person who chooses to treat people, always of lower status, as if they were family. The patron was not obliged to offer their generosity but chose to provide it freely. The recipients could not earn this gracious treatment; it was given freely. In return, the recipients of this generosity only needed to honour their patron. The benefit to the patron was honour. In this system, there was also a broker, often outside the social systems, aware of the need for wealth in their world, whose job was to put the client and the patron together. The landowner patron may represent God in this parable and many other ways. I've often thought that Jesus was the perfect broker ... outside the social system and aware of the needs of both client and patron, in his case, God.

The first hired wouldn't have known about the patron's treatment of the last hired if they hadn't needed to hang around for their 'day's wage.' However, they did see it, and they questioned it. The people of the first century were already moving to the 'we have to work for our bread.' We, today, have moved far away from Patronage, a system of generosity, toward the 'if you don't work, you don't deserve' mentality that we honour so highly today.

We are divided by the judgement of others.

Our Kingdom of status divides us ... we know full well what items of status in our culture are. The right car, neighbourhood, a cottage on Lake Joseph, and clothes with the correct labels (Chanel, Prada, and Dior). It might be said that these are divisions of 'good taste,' but we also know that they are merely divisions of money.

We are a money-divided Kingdom where competition, one-upmanship and being right are valued over getting along, collaborating and listening to each other.

We're a 'workaholic' Kingdom where people only deserve what we work for, and those who don't work enough don't deserve.

We are a Kingdom separated by those that deserve and those that don't deserve. We are a Kingdom of self-reliance. It is no wonder that the Patronage of God is not even on the radar of so many people.

The currency of our Kingdom is different than the currency of the Kingdom of Heaven. God's currency is grace and compassion, and we are promised there is enough always.

A Scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann, describes the value of this 'culturally enforced outsideness' so well. He says:

"Because the totalism [that is, the system] wants to silence, banish, or eliminate every such unwelcome [prophetic] intrusion, the tricky work is to find standing ground outside the totalism from which to think the unthinkable, to imagine the unimaginable, and to utter the unutterable."

How can we seek the currency of our Kingdom that accepted 'the way it is' that is out of step with the currency of the Kingdom of Heaven? How can we 'find the standing ground to think the unthinkable, to utter the unutterable'?

In a few weeks, we get to Exodus 33, where we learn that Moses had a "tent of meeting outside the camp" where Moses met with God. Today, I am most interested that this tent was 'outside the camp' and wonder how we get 'outside the camp' of our world to meet with God and get an accurate picture of our camp-Kingdom

I learned recently, and I can tell you that my stomach ached as I read about Emmanuel Kant, revered Philosopher of the late 1700s, having CREATED the notion of race ... which led to racism, the other 'without' and the other 'within.' So, how TRUE is race? It is NOT true ... it was the invention of a philosopher attempting to understand the world that was NOT Prussia. So, race is a creation of thought, an emanation of reason. But race is NOT absolute truth. The divisions of race that have held us apart for centuries are NOT the truth of our, or anybody's, being. Race is a creation of a Kingdom that divides.

Since I saw this as the truth, I must now unwind all the truth built on this fallacy ... this core of our Kingdom. So, what else needs to be questioned?

I'd like to offer that EVERYTHING needs to be questioned. So, as we think about our culture and what we KNOW TO BE the truth, let's think about what it might be for us to live on the margins of our worldview, to go as Moses did to the "tent outside the camp"? Just step to the edge so that we are not embedded in the middle, the core of assuredness, the dogma of our Kingdom.

In CONCLUSION

The dividers then and now ... The struggle for power, the worry that there is not enough, the judgement of deserving, the burden of self-reliance ... subdivided and subdivided into so many behaviours and beliefs that tear humanity apart.

To answer Peter's question, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Jesus answers, "There is no divide between you and all the other people, between those that have heard and those

that have not heard, between those that have given up things and those that have not given up everything to follow me. The divides we feel are of our own making. God's grace is the one unifier.

God's grace nourishes and empowers us; it is free for all and never gets used up.

As the agents of division crept up on the people of the first century, they creep up on us today. We must keep questioning our Kingdom on earth. By the grace of God, we are one people, undivided. We are one. AMEN