

“My Precious Old Shoe”

September 24, 2017

10:00 AM

Fr. Jim Plough

Revised from “The Old Shoe,” POUGH SHARES 1.

Last week and this week, we have two parables involving mathematics, the parable about the unjust servant who was forgiven a debt of a hundred thousand dollars and then refused to forgive a debt of ten dollars, and today’s account of laborers who put in a twelve-hour day and late-comers who worked only one hour. You don’t have to be good in math to understand these parables. The message in these parables is not in the math. The message concerns matters of justice and mercy, an unforgiving servant last week, and a compassionate employer this week. The math is only frosting.

The parables of Jesus are like an old shoe. They have been worn for a long time for many different reasons. We like them more and more and would not part from them for anything. Perhaps this is why some of us have so many old shoes in the closet, and sweaters and caps as well.

New shoes, my aunt used to say, are for Sunday, a special shine for a special time, then work-a-day shoes for weekdays. They’ve grown comfortable and support the special configuration of your foot. Finally, they become paint shoes, scuffed and spotted and weather-beaten, for work around the house. My aunt also followed a custom of a Sunday sunny side up for throw rugs and a week-day underside up and sunny side down.

The parable of the vineyard is like an old shoe; it has gone through a number of editions, each with a special purpose, and each with a custom fit. I would suggest that there are three editions of this parable.

Generations before Jesus told a story of late-comers to make the point that it is never too late to begin. A lot can be accomplished in a short time. You’re never too old. No one has passed you by. You haven’t missed the boat; the boat hasn’t left yet. So what if it is the eleventh hour! Remember the parable of the vineyard. (Matthew 20: 1-16).

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As Jesus tells the story, there is an added ingredient. The story takes on the question of subsistence wages in the Palestine of Jesus' time, when a full day's wage (a denarius) was hardly enough for a family. Jesus puts the old parable to new use, to stress the generosity of the employer who pays workers on the basis of their need and not just their production. All workers needed a denarius to meet their daily needs.

Our culture has a different view. American culture says you should be paid for what you earn. If you work ten hours at \$20.00 per hour, you should be paid \$200 dollars. If you work one hour at that wage, you should be paid \$20.00 Jesus says to receive a just wage, you should be paid in terms of what you need. As Isaiah has the Lord putting it, your ways are not my ways (Isaiah 55: 6-9).

The principle of a minimum wage promoted by many Americans, adheres to that principle, but does not fulfill it. A minimum wage is hardly sufficient for an individual, certainly not for a family. A minimum wage is seldom a just wage. It does not meet needs adequately.

For a long time, the church has followed the principle of a just wage as a counterpoint to Marxist views of work. In Marxist ideology, a person's value depends on productivity. You are worth what your labor can produce. If you are not productive, you have no worth. Jesus's version of the parable of the laborers contradicts “product” as a measure of worth. The church's view of labor relates more to need than to production. A just wage is an amount sufficient to meet a family's needs, based on the notion of one bread-winner in a family, not having to have two bread-winners to meet that family's needs. Productivity may enhance one's wage; you may be paid more than you need, based on your skills and quality of “production.” But a minimum wage requires an amount sufficient to meet every one's needs.

Finally, a third edition of the parable, the saying tacked on about the last coming first and the first coming last (a saying tacked on to several parables). This is probably an addition reflecting the course of events in the lives of the earliest Christians. There were those Jews among Jesus' followers who had borne the heat of the day, who had observed the ritual law all of their lives, who had paid the price for becoming Christians by suffering expulsion from family and synagogue.

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Now suddenly joining them were Gentiles, newly-converted at the last hour, sharing equally the treasure of Christian faith, “Johnny come Latelies.” Where was the justice in making the last come first? The parable of the old shoe was given new meaning: God is ever magnanimous and compassionate, treating people according to their present circumstances, forgetting their past. Why be envious? In ways, we are all late-comers. “Late have I loved you,” St. Augustine could say. We too have never gotten around to becoming what we know the Lord has wanted of us. So much is past, so much remains to be done. It is not too late. You may be last; you can still come first.

These are three interpretations of the parable of the vineyard, three editions to choose from: if it’s late in your life, it’s not too late. Much can be accomplished at a late hour. For example, we know of retirees accomplishing much by entering a second role in life. Furthermore, if you have been unproductive or are in need, remember that the Lord is a compassionate employer; he pays you according to your need, not your productivity. Finally, don’t begrudge the lucky ones who haven’t known the toil and pain you’ve experienced. We are all late-comers, beneficiaries of a compassionate God who values us in terms of who we are, not what we have accomplished.

Heaven is not a reward for good behavior. We can’t work our way to heaven. We can’t pray our way. We can’t determine who gets to heaven, and especially who doesn’t get there. Heaven is a grace that is pure gift.

God’s ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. Why begrudge God his mercy? Mercy is God’s chief characteristic! That’s what Pope Francis has been teaching all along. For some, this parable of workers in the vineyard is the most disconcerting and distressing parable Jesus ever told. God is not fair. He gives heaven even to those who haven’t worked very long to earn it. For Pope Francis, this is a favorite parable. It fits him like an old shoe.