**Grapes and Cucumbers**

Dr. Sarah Brosnan is a professor of neuroscience at Georgia State University. Her biography says that she studies “the mechanisms underlying cooperation, reciprocity, inequity, and other economic decisions in nonhuman primates from an evolutionary perspective.”

In short. She studies the social habits of monkeys in order to learn more about why people act the ways we do.

In 2012, she and her team decided to look into economics. More specifically, they wanted to see if there were ways that people related to their money that could be traced evolutionary to some of our ancestors. And so she set up an experiment using Capuchin monkeys.

Two monkeys who knew each other were taken out of the group that lived together and placed in two enclosures side by side. They could see one another, but they could not get into each other’s space.

Then they were trained to perform a simple task. Pick up a small stone and hand it to the researcher, who in turn would reward them with a small slice of cucumber.

The researchers found that the monkeys would both gladly perform this task over and over again for a slice of cucumber. They would do it 10, 20, even 30 times right in a row without skipping a beat.

That is until the researcher gave one money a grape.

The pattern was the same for one. Hand me a pebble, get a slice of cucumber.

But the other who hand over a pebble and receive a whole grape, a much more desirable reward.

As soon as the second money had been paid with a grape, the researcher went back to the first money who enthusiastically handed over the pebble.

But when that second monkey, who had just seen his friend receive a grape, was handed a slice of cucumber, he inspected it for a moment, and then hurled is right back into the poor lab assistants face.

I put a link to the video on the church’s Facebook page so you can watch it when you get home.

The reaction was the same, for monkey after monkey. They would gladly do the task for a cucumber, but once they had seen someone get a grape for it. They would reject the cucumber, throwing it back, shaking the cage, and jumping around. Again and again, until eventually they would simply refuse the task all together.

So if you heard this morning’s parable, and your first thought was “that’s not fair,” take heart, these ideas about fairness and equality are hardwired into us. It is a basic feature of how our minds see the world.

So what happened in this parable?

A vineyard owner went out early in the morning to hire some day-laborers to work in his field. He found a few and agreed with them to pay the usual daily wage for work. And they were perfectly happy with this arrangement. No second thoughts. A days work for a days pay. So far so good.

Then that same vineyard owner goes back into town to find more workers. By now, its 9am, well into the work day, and he finds a few who people who do not have any work. Go to my vineyard he says, and I will pay you whatever is fair.

They agree. After all, they had just been facing the prospect of a day without work, all the jobs were gone and they were left with no work, which meant no pay.

So when the vineyard owner says to them, “I will pay you what is fair” I assume they were imaging something pro-rated. “Anything is better than nothing” they thought. And they went off to the vineyard to work.

He did this again at noon, at 3, and again at 5, when the day was almost over.

Now it is important to pause here and note that, before we even get to the rest of the parable Jesus’ audience would be feeling pretty confused about this. And we might be too.

It is very strange that a vineyard owner would not have know how many workers he needed to begin with, and it doesn't seem like conditions would change so rapidly that he should have to go back into town every few hours to find help.

The followers who first heart this parable would wonder, as we might be too, why he has planned so poorly and ended up wasting his day tracking down labor instead of attending to running his vineyard.

And they would be totally perplexed as to why he would be hiring workers at 5pm. By the time they make it to the field and get their instructions, they day will be over.

And then it really get’s strange.

The vineyard owner lines up the laborers in order, beginning with the ones who arrived latest, and ending with the ones who arrived earliest.

And to those workers who arrived just as the day was ending, who probably did very little work at all. He handed a drachma, the usual day’s wage. The amount that he had first agreed to pay the early morning workers.

As each walked through the line he paid each one exactly the same. No matter how long they worked, each received an ordinary day’s pay.

The workers from the early morning are incensed. “These people only worked an hour, and you have made them equal to us who worked all day in the heat?!”

Calmly the vineyard owner replied. “I paid you what we agreed on. What difference does it make to you what I paid the others?”

And of course the vineyard owner is technically correct. The workers from the morning did agree to work all day for the normal wage. And that is precisely what happened. Why should the presence of others change that agreement in any way?

Yet even though the vineyard owner is technically right, this parable seems to grate up against our sense of what is right, our sense of what it fair.

Something deep in our bones says this isn’t right. Throw the cucumber in his face.

And this is precisely the reaction that Jesus wanted to provoke.

This parable is constructed in a beautiful way to knock us off balance a little bit. To offend our sense of what is right and what is fair. To force us to try to see things a new way. To turn the world a bit on its side, so that we can counter some amazing truth about who God is.

You and I, in addition to being joined as members of the body of Christ, are also a part of an economic system. And living both as a part of the Body of Christ, and an economic system can pose some uncomfortable tensions.

Let me name two examples that I struggle with

I wonder sometimes if the money in my retirement account is being invested in companies whose business is hurting the world. And I wonder if it actually make any difference if I took it out.

I also know that there are a lot of things that I want to buy for myself, and yet I cannot ever quite shake the sense that each dollar I spend on my own comfort is a choice to not give that dollar to someone else’s survival. But how would I begin to know where to give that money instead.

Now this is not to say that these things are so easily resolved. In fact I think that the parable is trying to walk us right up that precise point.

The kingdom of God and the economic ordering our our lives do not fit so neatly together all the time. The ethical imagination of Christ leads to some pretty odd payroll practices. And we are left mostly just with this odd feeling that things are not quite so neatly resolved…

This is not to say that Jesus does not care about economics. He is a tireless advocate for the poor, but in this parable it seems he is mostly just calling the question and pointing out that our economic imagination may not be vast enough to encompass God’s greatest hopes for our world.

And so with that uneasy feeling front and center. Jesus makes this point:

However you are engaged with economics. It cannot define your worth.

Do not confuse your wage with your value as a child of God.

To God, your value has nothing to do with your contributions to the work force. It has nothing to do with how well, or how efficiently your labor.

It has nothing to do with whether you feel like you are doing all the right things as a parent or not.

It has nothing to do with what time in your life you discovered the right direction.

It has nothing to do with whether you own 2 houses or none.

It has nothing to do with whether you have been a good friend or let people down.

It has nothing to do with how your marriage is going, or how your 4011k is performing.

To God, your value is just a part of who you are.

No matter who you are, no matter what you do, no matter if you oversleep, or overwork. God’s love for you will get doled out just the same.

Now there are plenty of things in this world and in your life that will tell you otherwise. There are plenty of people and institutions that will try to measure your worth and measure your value a thousand different ways.

There are people and institutions that are always trying to persuade us that some lives just matter more than others. That some people are worth more, and some less.

It’s no small thing. It is deep in our bones. No matter how hard we try to fight it, when we watch some people get grapes and we keep getting cucumbers, it drives us crazy.

Not because grapes are that much better. Its mostly just water…

But because somewhere deep down, we start to believe that it reflects our value. That we are somehow not worth as much. Not as important. Not as deserving.

All that outward stuff just keeps reinforcing this fear the gnaws at us. Maybe I am just not worth as much.

Jesus told them this parable, so that we could realize that that is a lie.

Jesus wanted an economic system with justice at its foundation. He wanted a better world for the poor. Buy more than that, he wanted to make sure that we do not look to the market to tell us who we are or what we are worth.

Our worth has nothing to do all that.

It has to do with God’s love for you. Yes you. Just the way you are. With everything you did and forgot to do.

With all your stumbles and falls.

When God created you, God looked at you and said: “this is good.”

At your baptism, God smiled from heaven and said “this one. my beloved.”

That is what you are worth.

The rest, in the end, is just grapes and cucumbers.