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Exodus 16:2-15

Matthew 20:1-16

AT THE END OF THE DAY

The Broadway musical “Les Misérables”, based on Victor Hugo’s epic novel, is set in the early part of the 19th century in Paris. Revolting conditions grip those who are poor, as they struggle to find enough food to keep body and soul together. A group commiserate, singing their frustrations with these words that reflect their despair:

At the end of the day you’re another day older
And that’s all you can say for the life of the poor
It’s a struggle, it’s a war
And there’s nothing that anyone’s giving
One more day standing about, what is it for?
One day less to be living.

At the end of the day you’re another day colder
And the shirt on your back doesn’t keep out the chill
And the righteous hurry past
They don’t hear the little ones crying
And the plague is coming on fast, ready to kill
One day nearer to dying! ¹

At the end of a different day, the Hebrew people in the wilderness complained to Moses and his brother, Aaron, saying, “We’re starving.” They had sunk to a similar state of despair as we see and hear at the beginning of “Les Misérables.” It had been just six weeks since God had amazingly, miraculously delivered them from their slavery in Egypt. An incredible string of events fed their faith that God actually wanted them to live in freedom, but now they were looking to be fed with something that would keep them alive. A food crisis had turned into a faith crisis.

Now they were in the large Sinai Peninsula wilderness area and they weren't exaggerating about starving, at least not very much.

They were definitely suffering from their hunger in ways I never have, although I remember complaining to my mom, telling her, "I'm starving." Supper was going to be half an hour later than to what I was accustomed. It wasn't the first time my mother had heard such exaggerated complaints. Even though her early years were during the Great Depression, she didn't lecture me about what true hunger was, at least at that point when I was less than fully ready to learn about how privileged our family was. In kindness, she even refrained from rolling her eyes, at least where I could see her doing so. She knew growing kids get hungry. She knew most kids can lay it on thick when complaining. Never were the providers in my family of origin unemployed. Not once were they so sick or disabled that they couldn't work. Never were we without two vehicles. We did not go to fancy restaurants. A lot of my clothes were hand-me-downs from my older brother. But never, ever did I miss a meal. As someone who now has seen children in Congo literally dying of malnourishment, it is a bit embarrassing to admit that I ever used the word 'starving' to describe my own condition.

"That's not fair," I remember complaining to my dad. My older brother and many of my friends got to stay up later than I did. From my perspective, I had more chores than did some of my friends. And there were more restrictions on junk food. And there were the requirements to practice piano with the piano situated where I could gaze out the window at my friends playing baseball while I was playing Bach. There were all kinds of ways I was convinced that I was not being treated fairly. Of course, I didn't fully know the real injustices going on in Alabama where I spent most of my childhood. In my early school years, people of color were not allowed to go to what were considered the better schools. I knew that almost all of the decision makers in my town, state, and country were white males and as a white male I did not think of myself as being privileged. Looking back on things now, I've gotten to attend the schools I hoped to attend. I've gotten to live in the neighborhoods where I could afford to live. I've not lost out on jobs nor have I been hassled by police or store workers because of my skin color, gender, or sexual orientation. And yet I have to admit that I am more sensitive to

the small situations where it feels like I have been treated less than fairly, than to the large injustices that remain unaddressed in our country.

“That’s not fair,” the day laborers in Jesus’ parable complained when at the end of the day they received exactly what had been promised them as a day’s wage. What was wrong was that those who had wanted to work a full day, but were not hired on until late in the day, also got a full day’s wage. When the day laborers who had worked a full day saw what those who had worked less got paid, they suddenly thought it was going to be their lucky day. But instead, they got what they had earned, while all got what they needed. And they were angry.

Let me point out that Jesus was not teaching about labor relations or how to structure salary for long-term business success. Both of those things are important, but his imagery serves a different purpose here. Biblical stories often use a vineyard as imagery for where people were serving God, and that seems to be what Jesus is addressing in his story. There are those who felt like they had been working for the owner of the vineyard or God for a longer time than had some who had come late in the day. There were those who felt like they had not been invited into the vineyard until near the end of the day.

Those who first read this parable in Matthew, may have thought about the tension between the earliest Christians who came out of a Jewish background and those who came to the faith a bit later, who tended to be Gentiles. Others would hear it and think of a situation where some people have served God throughout their lives and others only embrace the faith toward the end of their days, but both are granted the same ‘reward.’

There are times and situations where complaint or even protest are appropriate. Yet, when we look at the wilderness and vineyard stories side by side, among the amazing things we see is the human capacity to be upset with God in a situation where the provision of needs seems to be unsure and also in situations where everyone’s needs have been met. In one case, there are complaints that God hasn’t provided for the needs and in the other there are complaints that God has provided for what people need.

When we are seeking God's provision for our basic needs or when we are seeking forgiveness for our sins, we are delighted with a God who has a generous heart. But when we look at who has what at the end of the day, we may be less than thrilled at the amazing generosity of God's heart. With a series of hurricanes and earthquakes, there are fresh questions about how God will provide for people in need. There are tensions between what is fair and what is compassionate. Not all of our anxieties or concerns may be wiped clean in our experience.

However, at the end of the day, even when we complain to or about God, in the face of our revolts, we will find a revolutionary, amazing grace that does not leave us empty handed. Those in the wilderness were provided manna and quail. Those in the vineyard had their needs met as well. But will we be empty hearted? God's compassion and generosity isn't withdrawn in the face of complaints. However, we have to figure out where we are going to be at the end of the day, where there is room for us to either be grateful or to be acrimonious. At the end of the day, we can be growing in trust toward One who provides in all kinds of ways, we can be growing in a compassion that would reflect God's priorities, even being God's partner to provide some kind of manna to others in need - or we can always find reasons to be moving in the opposite direction. Beloved children of God, whether you find yourself currently in a wilderness or a vineyard, where do you want your heart to be at the end of the day? At the end of the day, what will you say or sing?

¹ Les Misérables has music composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg , with lyrics written by Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel, English-language libretto by Herbert Kretzmer.