

God's Rights

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Matthew 20:1–16

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what is my own? Matthew 20:1-16

"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what is my own?" That is the unsettling word that closes in upon us in this familiar parable. It seems to be about rights. We hear a lot about rights these days: "inalienable rights" to life, liberty, and the pursuit of just about anything one might hanker after. Human rights, civil rights, right to life, right to bear arms, gay rights, gray rights, minority rights, women's rights, children's rights, animal rights —you name it, someone demands it or is demonstrating for it.

But now, like a bolt from the blue, a comet from some undiscovered realm, another right announces itself, projects itself smack into the middle of the payday lines of life: God's rights. Some came early, some late, and they all got the same — regardless. Is it not preposterous? Whoever heard of such a thing? And if that was not bad enough, the protest just gets the back of the hand: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what is my own?" How can we possibly accept that? Does God have the right to intrude, to butt in, on our affairs like that? For that matter, does anyone believe in God anymore — or at least a God like that? Oh yes, we tell ourselves that we do. We tell ourselves that God is, in general, love, and as such can be safely filed away in the back of the drawer. At best, God hovers in the background or just beyond the horizon of our important, busy lives.

God is a cipher whom we flatter with our favorite and most innocuous names. Can God actually intrude in this fashion? Yes, we talk rather grandly about "first article" concerns, but mostly that turns out to be about us, after all, not the Creator.

But here it is otherwise. God plants himself squarely — looks us straight in the eye and declares: "Am I not allowed to do as I choose with what is my own?" God's rights. The Creator's rights! What rights? We are not left to wonder: "Do you begrudge me my generosity?" God claims the right to be generous, to intrude, to butt in, if you will, not only to be generous, but to give everyone the same. He risks the right to break up the whole show, to

say something new, to start something new. And I expect that is what really galls us. As the Greek has it here: "Is your eye evil because I am good?" It is not the idea of generosity as such. Generosity is a nice idea. We are all for that — as long as it remains an idea. If God would just stay in heaven with the idea, or at least be fair about it and give payment where it is due, or be universal about it — be love in general — we could live with it. But actually to come, to intrude, to be generous to someone in particular — to give to those lazy ones the same as me, and just claim the right to do so — that is surely too much.

Yes, it is indeed preposterous. Except . . . except, of course, if it is our only real chance. Except if it is true. For if we are honest, what chance do we have, other than the sheer generosity of God? What chance do we have if all the laborers do not get the same? Where would we be if we got what we deserved? What chance do we have if God doesn't assert his rights, remains in heaven, and is just love in general? "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what is my own?" Could it be that is our only chance, our one and only real chance?

But where does that leave us? What is it that this God who claims such a right actually chooses to do? It would be a cruel trick if, after all this talk about God's right to do as he chooses, God actually does nothing after all. So we come to the heart of the matter — one last preposterous move. God has chosen that a word be spoken to you, a word that levels everything and puts an end to the old game and starts something new. It was a great risk. The world did not approve of this parable. This is not strange, for it is indeed awful — it meets no "need" of ours — so that we killed the one who told it. But God approved and raised him from the dead so the word should again be spoken, activating his Kingdom. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what is my own?" That's the way it is with God's grace — it's wild! It is God who has brought us to this, so now there is no way around it — I must say it: "You are God's own! You were claimed as God's own in baptism. God did what he wanted, did what he chose — with you. And if you have forgotten that, hear it again. Come and taste it. God claims the right to butt in here-and-now and permits his word of grace to be said to you: I declare unto you the forgiveness of your sins! There it is. Isn't that preposterous? Something absolutely novel? Not an ideal, not a generality, but a meeting, a new word, God's choice to do something here and now. You have heard it, there it is. How do you know there is a God? Through this!

Now perhaps you may be a little bit disappointed: Is that all there is? Should there not be something more? Have we not heard that before? As we like to put it now and then, "Do we

always have to be talking about salvation?

Is there not something beyond that?" Particularly since we have gotten ourselves off to the holy ministry or seminary we might like to think that grander things are in store. Well, we need to recall that this parable was told particularly for religious folk. They all got the same, you see. There isn't any more. God has invested everything just to arrange this sort of meeting, to intrude, to break in and do a new thing, to speak to you. To make new beings — called into new life from that which was not — creatures who actually rejoice at this seemingly unjust arrangement. God is not out just to be generous in himself but to do this to us, to make us new out of his generosity. The generosity itself spells the end of the old, kills the protester, brooks no resistance, and thus it saves, and makes us new. Isn't that fantastic? Is there anything more? There is, perhaps, only that parting warning shot across the bow for those who don't see: so the last will be first and the first last. We might comfort ourselves that being last is better than nothing, but it is a dangerous slight.

So we end where we started: God's rights. "Am I not allowed to do as I choose with what is my own?" You are God's own. Think on that! Isn't it wild? Don't you see? All our schemes and projects are over. And maybe, just maybe, if we catch a glimpse of what that means, all those other arguments about rights would begin to fall into place.

So, anyone for the vineyard?

SOURCE

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