

Sermon: November 28, 2021

“Bah! Humbug!”

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Scriptures: Galatians 6:7-8, Matthew 20:1-16

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and the first Sunday in which we get to talk about one of my favorite Christmas stories in our series called, “The Redemption of Scrooge.” Yes, *that* Scrooge. The miserly old man who walks around saying, “Bah! Humbug!” whenever anyone wishes him a happy Christmas.

I don’t know about you, but I love Christmastime. Maybe it’s the part of me that never quite grew up. There’s little I love more than Christmas. I will play Christmas music year-round, though I try not to annoy the family too much with it. Of course, Advent isn’t Christmastime in the church, but a time of preparation and expectation. A time of awaiting the birth of our Lord and Savior. And although Advent isn’t Christmas, itself, it is appropriate for us to talk a little about it, because this is the time when the rest of society begins celebrating.

I’ve never really been a “Scrooge” about Christmas or anything else (although, sometimes, I can tell you that too much socializing wears me out), but when I think about Charles Dickens’ famous character, I’m reminded of a few folks in my life who have been. I’m sure you can think of at least one person in your life who’s either a Grinch or a Scrooge about Christmas. Maybe that person is even you!

You all know the old story, right? Scrooge is a miserly old man who runs a business. He’s cruel to everyone he meets and, what’s more, he’s a greedy

and selfish man. When we meet Scrooge in any version of *A Christmas Carol*, we realize immediately that he seems to have nothing but contempt for everything. And everyone. He treats his poor employee so abysmally that he will only give him part of a day off for Christmas, and even that he will have his pay docked for.

Scrooge does have one great love, though—money. Scrooge lives according to the principle, “You reap what you sow,” which is Galatians 6:7 taken to the extreme. He sows his love of money, and that’s exactly what he reaps. But unfortunately, it’s the only thing he reaps. His relationships with others, his community spirit, are nonexistent. And this “go it alone” attitude focused solely on money, Scrooge will go on to discover, does not bode well for his future.

We’ll talk more in the coming weeks about those ghosts that come to visit Scrooge after the passing of his similarly miserly old business partner, Mr. Marley, but this week, I wanted to focus specifically on Scrooge’s attitude and worldview.

In some way, I’m sure we, too, can identify with Scrooge’s perspective? Perhaps we’re not cruel in the way he is, but that negative, downcast perspective creeps into us all from time to time. I can be that way about social occasions that aren’t related to work. I know even I have moments of selfishness and greed. Moments when I want more time to myself or, as I’m trying to pay bills, wishing I’d been called to another line of work. I remember praying on that when I was feeling called to ministry... like, “Listen, God. We need to talk. I know you want me to do this work, but can’t

I have gone into a more lucrative line of work? Like... can't you give me a theology that's a little more prosperity gospel and a little less poor do-gooding Jesus?

That's usually when I imagine Jesus shaking his head and saying, "Jessica, Jessica, Jessica. No. That's not how I do things and it's not the path I have called you to." But, you might ask, doesn't God love us? Doesn't God want us all to do well? Prosper? Doesn't God want us all to be comfortable financially?

I certainly don't think God means for us to be destitute, but we do know that Jesus says consistently that the last will be first and the first will be last. He tells us to care about the least of these. He tells us that the kingdom of God belongs to those least valued by the world. In the world, those who can contribute most, those who have the most, those who can give the most are deemed the most valuable.

But what does Jesus say about the economy God values? It's not anything like that of the world, is it? And if we think it is a merit-based economy, well, we get a really big wakeup call when we read God's own words through Jesus, don't we? If we think about the parable of the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16, which I read moments ago, we see God's that God's understanding is a bit different than ours. It neither fits our current understanding about the economic values people should live by, nor the values of 2,000 years ago. When Jesus tells this parable, it's as much a shock to the disciples as to the rest of us.

Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” Now, the landowner has work that needs to be done and when he hires the workers, he tells them, they’ll receive the usual daily wage. Soon, he finds that there is much more work to be done and many other people who need work. So he hires more from the marketplace and says, “I will pay you whatever is right.” Trusting the landowner will be a man of his word, they go out to work. He goes out twice more throughout the day finding others who need work and, having work to give, hires them, promising the same. To pay them what is right.

At the end of the day, the landowner has his manager bring in the workers from the last hired to the first hired. So the guys hired at 5 o’clock come up and he gives them the usual daily wage—which was a denarius, by the way. The ones hired at 3 come up and he gives them, too, a denarius. Then the groups hired at noon and at nine come up and receive a denarius. So the guys hired first come strolling up thinking, “we’ve been working all day, surely he’s going to give us more.” But the landowner gives them the exact same pay, one denarius, the usual daily wage, as they were promised at the start of their workday.

Understandably, they’re a little ticked at this and they let it be known. They’re particularly bothered that the ones who worked only an hour got the same wage as they who had worked 12. They’re tired. They’ve been out in the scorching sun for the whole day. They’re working in a vineyard, so this is not easy work on the physical body. They’re tired. They want fair pay for the work they’ve done and they’re unhappy that the landowner has made their work equal to the work of the ones who spent much less time in

the heat doing the backbreaking work in the vineyard. So what's the deal here? Why is the landowner acting in this way that seems to unfair?

The key is in the wording of this parable. As we look back at the text, we see that Jesus is very careful about his words in demonstrating that the landowner is being a man of his word. The 12-hour workers agreed to the usual daily wage, one denarius. That's what they got. What did the workers who came in later agree to? The landowner says, he will pay them what is *right*, not fair or commensurate with the hours they had worked, but right. So issue for the first workers is that they want to be treated differently because they were fortunate enough to be hired first, they want a wage that is fair. But the issue for the landowner is different. It's not about fairness for him, but about what is right. What is just. What is generous.

What Jesus does in this parable is antithetical to our understanding of the economy or our own capitalistic system, in which we believe all are compensated fairly for their contributions depending on what kind of work they do. It doesn't seem fair that those who worked so many fewer hours would get the same share. Why are they equal to the ones who worked all day? But the landowner's position is different: he is choosing to do what he feels is right. These people waiting to work all day are of no less value than those who had worked all day, they just didn't get as lucky to get hired right out of the gate. The landowner is operating from a place of generosity, while the first-hired workers are operating from a place, really, of selfishness. They got what they came for. What business of theirs is it what the landowner chooses to do with the rest of his money?

At the end of this parable, Jesus returns to this idea that the last will be first and the first will be last. The Message translation calls this, “the Great Reversal,” going against the way of the world. Jesus is signaling here that God’s “economy” doesn’t follow the same rules as the world. But from our 21st century western context, we might ask, how can this parable be any kind of good news?

Well, I’m glad you asked. What it tells us is that God’s economy runs on free grace, not worth. God doesn’t see one person as worthier than others. God’s grace is freely given. And that’s *good news*, my friends, because we really aren’t better or worse than others. How do we know that? Well, one clue is right in the creation stories at the beginning of the Bible: God created us all in God’s own image. Male and female, both, in God’s own image. And if God created all of humanity in God’s own image, then we know we are all beloved children of God, no greater or lesser than others of God’s children.

God isn’t handing out grace as part of a merit system. We must learn to accept that gift from God with gratitude and, in that gratitude, share it with others. We must remember that Christ is living with us and that we are here on earth to serve and love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, why? Because God didn’t make us better than them, but fully alike in God’s own image. God hasn’t said that those of us born into wealth or comfort or the “first world” are any better or more deserving because of our status. Jesus is specifically saying we’re not better. We’re the same.

God didn’t call us to the Bah! Humbug! mentality that hoards all of what we have and keeps it to ourselves, but to remember that regardless of race,

class, wealth, ethnicity, we are all children of God. God didn't make us better because we love the opposite sex or because we identify as the parts we were born with. God doesn't separate us along lines of different or same, WE DO THAT.

In A Christmas Carol, Scrooge's friend Marley comes to visit him as a ghost to warn him that the way he's living will not do him any favors in the life to come. He's going to send to Scrooge three ghosts we will hear about in the coming weeks, the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. They will highlight for Scrooge that, as told to us in our Galatians reading today, he will reap what he sows, so he better make sure what he's sowing now is worth what he will reap later. In other words, if you are cold-hearted, stingy, and cruel now—prepare for a cold-hearted, stingy, and cruel fate.

Friends, Scrooge's fate is not unlike our own. We can be Scrooge, Bah! Humbugging" our way through the holiday season, stingy with our resources, and callous in our dealings with those we deem other or less than, or, we can invite the generosity of the landowner, of the kingdom, into our lives now. We spoke last week about how we are called to live into the kingdom values now, into God's economy of free grace *now*, not later.

In Advent keep watch, wide awake, as we await the coming of God with us, Immanuel, the baby Jesus—the one who came to show us what the kingdom of God looks like. The one who taught us, through parables like this, just how it is God wants us to live. So, this Advent season, let us think deeply about what we value and how that lines up or doesn't with what God values. Let us keep awake and recognize in others that same divine spark we believe lies in us. Let us remember that we reap what we sow, and let

us therefore sow seeds of goodness and freely given grace, instead of the seeds of men like Ebenezer Scrooge. Let us treat others the way we want to be treated not because we're trying to be polite, but because we are awake enough, humble enough, to see God with us and God within us *and* God within others.

Amen.