

“Us and Them”

By Edgar F. Solís

INTRO.

From 1948 until the early 1990s, Apartheid was characterized by an authoritarian political culture based on *baaskap* (or white supremacy). This culture ensured that South Africa was dominated politically, socially, and economically by the nation's minority white population. According to this system of social stratification, white citizens had the highest status. As we know, this horrifying system brought suffering, oppression, injustice and death to millions of people. All of this because of one perverse and destructive idea... that some humans are superior so therefore there must be a division; those who are superior deserve better, their destiny, lives and privileges are above the rest. The legacy of this cruel and horrible system is still found today in some groups that seek to divide humanity. Division is the favorite weapon of the dark forces that want to destroy families, communities and churches.

Bible Context: 1) *Jesus is approaching the end of his public ministry. Just a few days later, he'll be killed. As the end approaches, the stakes — and the tensions — are on the rise.*

At different times during the day a landowner hires laborers for his vineyard. Ultimately he compensates them all with the typical daily wage (one denarius), paying the latest arrivals first. This causes consternation among the early-arrivers - which they express, please note, as “grumbling” not that they ought to be paid more, but rather that the late-arrivers ought to be paid less: “you have made them equal to us.” (Matthew 20:11-12).

Theological Reflection.

Let's examine the words and character of the first laborers here. This statement depicts very well what is in their hearts and portrays powerfully what many believe today; "you have made them equal to us" meaning "We are better, we deserve more. You have to consider that we have privileges, we came first and we deserve a better destiny."

We live in a world that rewards individuals because of their personal efforts. *There's a work-and-reward ethos underpinning this complaint, the idea that goods should be distributed according to the effort and excellence in "bearing the burden of the day," as the early-arrivers put it (Matthew 20:12). This rings true: indeed, it's striking to consider just how much of our everyday lives — at home, at school, at work, and even in personal relationships — is saturated with this basic idea: you get out what you put in.*

However the rest of the passage depicts an upside-down logic, a different understanding of how things must go in the kingdom of God. The landowner's response makes it clear that this vineyard operates differently.

The landowner is acting not according the logic that the one who works the hardest receives the greatest reward but rather the idea that workers are rewarded according to the sovereign, generous will of the landowner. Such blessings then are not rewards at all — but gifts. In the same way God's grace and love function with a different ethos. The logic of the "kingdom of heaven" is not work-and-reward, but rather gift-and-gratitude. In God's heart and mind it is not the profit or the reward what matter, it is the person and the compassion that we all deserve. For Christian author Matthew Meyer Bolton the mentality of the first workers is an expression not simply of envy. He says: *they don't "envy" the late-arrivers, since "envy" means wishing to possess something someone else has. Rather, what we have here is the opposite: wishing*

someone else didn't have something you have! Indeed, the early-arrivers are neither "envious" nor obsessed with "fairness"; they're scornful. They've judged the late-arrivers to be less worthy, and they resent the landowner's action because it erases that imagined pecking order: "you have made them equal to us." Put simply, when the early-arrivers look at the late-arrivers, they see a "them" to look down on.

However the landowner, responds: "are you envious?" The Greek is literally, "is your eye evil?" Are you looking down on others? Thus the problem with the early-arrivers has to do with how they see — or rather, fail to see — the world around them. Where they could and should see "we," they see "us vs. them." Division. Where they could and should feel camaraderie, they feel contempt. Where they could and should see and celebrate a vineyard of God's grace, they see an arena of competition, and a cause for resentment, darkness.

I clearly see this reality in many different aspects of our human existence including political, social and economic. For centuries humanity has suffered war, isolation, and cruelty all because humans tend to see each other as superior or inferior. All of this has devastating consequences. *Philosopher Michael Parenti reflects on the injustices caused by the oppressive political systems of the world and states that some years ago (and probably still) the rich countries divided the world, looking down on others. Political leaders and the ruling powers labeled other countries as "third world." Parenti says: "The so-called third world is not poor...you don't go to poor countries to make money. There are very few poor countries in this world, most countries are rich! The Philippines are rich, Brazil is rich, Mexico is rich, Chile is rich, only the people are poor. There are billions to be made by exploitation. For 400 years the economic and political super powers of the world have carved out and taken the timber, the flax, the hemp, the cocoa, the rum, the tin, the copper, the iron, the rubber, the bauxite, the slaves and the cheap labor.*

These countries are not underdeveloped they're overexploited." As I thought about this, I imagined God looking at us and saying: "the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Takeaways: Dear church, do you know the response to Apartheid in South Africa? *Ubuntu*. The African notion of ubuntu. This word means "humanity." It means to live together. It is a concept that says, "I am through you and you are through me." In another words "I am human because of you." It's only when we engage in truthful dialogue and express the desire to build relationships that we can grow as individuals. So to the extent that I am estranged from you, I am less than human. It's a relationship that is required. **In Ubuntu** you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life." May God illuminate our way as we move through these difficult times of the pandemic and the political turmoil that has dragged us to a time of division, hate, and discrimination.

Today's parable is about what "the kingdom of heaven" is like. A Bible commentary states that the parable's central point isn't economic or moral; rather, it's meant to evoke and illustrate the realm of God, the new world that has "come near". That's why this parable is to be understood as a picture of how God's kingdom turns supposed hierarchies upside down. This parable is a classic case of "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." To listeners who feel unworthy, or unholy, or "on the outside looking in," the parable comes with the good news that despite appearances, there is a hidden economy in creation, heaven's economy, based not on righteousness but on grace. Division, contempt and hate has no place in the "kingdom of heaven" now dawning on earth. *Be encouraged for the "last" shall be first! Amen!*