



WOE TO THE BOOKKEEPERS

September 24, 2017, The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 20:1-16

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

“For ten days, the gates are open and the world is fluid. We are finally awake, if only in fits and starts, if only to toss and turn. For ten days, transformation is within our grasp. For ten days, we can imagine ourselves not as fixed and immutable beings, but rather as a limitless field upon which qualities and impulses rise up and fall away like waves on the sea...For ten days the field of the mind is like a painting by Kandinsky...and we have the sense that we can shape our lives by changing where to invest our focus and intention...”¹

These are the words Rabbi Alan Lew uses to describe the Ten Days of Teshuva, the ten days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in which our Jewish brothers and sisters are currently engaged. During this time the gates of heaven are open and all are invited to repent and find right relationship with God.

I find the idea simultaneously liberating and intimidating. The concept that we are given an opportunity to step away from all of our previous failures and stumbling as we turn toward the divine is a remarkable gift. On the other hand, at least for me, it feels like there are so many ways that I have fallen short that it is like trying to cram 20 pounds of rubbish into a 10-pound bag. I am not sure ten days is enough time for me to turn from my vast imperfections to come before our perfect God.

But that is because I am starting from the wrong side of the equation. In the end, our opportunities to repent, to be changed, to turn toward God are not so much telling about ourselves but much more so about the one to whom we seek to turn.



The parable we just heard read tells the story of some day laborers and a landowner. We are told that this story portrays what the kingdom of heaven is like. It opens early in the morning as the landowner agrees with a group of laborers to come and work for the agreed-upon usual wage. The landowner goes out again at nine and finds others without work whom he hires, promising to pay what is right. The same thing occurs at noon and three. And again at five he goes out and invites everyone he sees to come and work in the vineyard.

At the end of the day the owner instructs the manager to pay the workers, but oddly asks that the workers to arrive the latest be paid first. The workers who worked the least received a full day's wages. As the workers who had done a full day's work stepped up they assumed they were in store for a big Wall Street bonus, but they received the same full day's wages. Not surprisingly, the grumbling and complaining began immediately. From the time we are just beginning to toddle around on our own two feet we all learn the concept of fairness. And anytime we think we have not gotten our rightful share we call out, "that's not fair!" We believe the world should be fair. There should be some great balancing scale in the sky measuring out what is due to each and every one of us and at the end of the day we should get what we rightly deserve. And we not only carefully measure out what we receive. We are also quick to keep a measuring eye on what our neighbors receive, as if all the world were a great big co-op board meeting.

Each of us has a little green-visored bookkeeper in our heads and hearts. And this bookkeeper measures out how we are treated in the world. She evaluates how much we are paid for the work we do and how much praise we receive for it. She compares how much we do for our spouses as compared to how much they do for us. She weighs what our friends offer to us. She reviews whether we are receiving our fair share of life's bounty or not. Head bent low, fingers furiously clicking and clacking away on her calculator, she offers evaluations and judgments on everything and everyone in our lives, including ourselves.

In our relationships, she creates a silent coda to our expressions of affection and gratitude. When we say to our spouse, "I love you," she silently adds "but I don't



think you appreciate me enough.” When we say to a friend “I value our friendship,” she silently adds “but I wish you were more supportive of me.”

This little bookkeeper is the one that stopped those all-day workers from thanking the landowner for paying them the appropriate wage and instead complained about what others received. And this little bookkeeper is the same one who makes me anxious during these days of Teshuva. Sure, I want to repent, but my little bookkeeper has all of my failings well measured out and the list is pretty long. This little bookkeeper wonders how the big bookkeeper in the sky has measured out what I have done, right and wrong. And as she wonders she shakes her head, wishing there was a way to just file for bankruptcy. The little bookkeeper suggests it might not even be worth trying to repent. After all, why sink more resources into a losing proposition?

I often wonder about those full-day workers and what happened in the days to come. Do you think their little bookkeepers convinced them to never work for that landowner again? Do you think their sense of fairness demanded that they refuse his work and his money? Do you think they decided to stand on that street corner, broke and hungry, rather than work for someone with such faulty accounting practices? After all, if that stupid landowner even had a bookkeeper, he certainly was not following her advice.

And that’s the thing, the landowner had no bookkeeper, and neither does our God. There is no divine spreadsheet with credits for work well done on one side and debits for our mistakes on the other. It turns out that God is reckless with divine resources. Returning again and again to the market square, and inviting all who wish to come and work in the vineyard. And whenever we finally accept the invitation, there is a full share of loving grace waiting for us. It is not precisely parceled out according to what we have earned. A full share is waiting for all who will merely accept the invitation.

As we find ourselves in these days of Teshuva, when our Jewish brothers and sisters talk of the gates of heaven being open, we would be wrong to be intimidated



by the potential length of the journey to be in right relationship with God, or that we may have started too late, or have too many obstacles before us. As long as we accept the invitation and start walking in that direction there is a full share of God's loving and forgiving grace awaiting us. In the end it is not so much about God's choice to accept us, in our sometimes rather forlorn states, as it is about our choice to accept the invitation to join the divine in that blessed vineyard.

In the intriguing novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders writes about the tragic death of President Lincoln's young son, Willie. In the graveyard, where Willie is laid to rest and Lincoln comes to visit in the middle of the night, we are introduced to a large cast of characters. This motley crew are all ghosts except that they cannot accept that reality. Rather than think of themselves as dead, they think of themselves as sick. In the midst of their self-deception, angels arrive with an immense bounty of blooming flowers and trees, an endless array of appetizing delicacies, and every possible sight, sound and scent as to fill these haggard folk with joy.

But the vast majority of them refuse the invitation to join in the feast and come before their God. They are proud of their fortitude, preferring to cling to the bookkeeping spreadsheet of their lives, obsessing over what they still believe they are due in this life, rather than accepting all that is being offered to them. There is a woman, a Mrs. Abigail Blass, who has an exact accounting of all the worldly possessions from her former life, down to every last gold coin, goat and chicken. Being removed from all of that, she clings to whatever is at hand. Mrs. Abigail Blass announces, "I have over four hundred twigs and nearly sixty pebbles of various sizes. I have two dead-bird parts, dirt motes too numerous to count. Before retiring, I count my dead-bird parts, twigs, pebbles, and motes rending each with my teeth to ensure all are still real."²

She would rather cling to what she has instead of opening her hands to receive the bounty set before her. As the story unfolds, more and more of the ghosts learn to let go of their precious precise accounting of their lives so they can be brought



before their God. But it is not an easy journey for most of them, as they desperately seek to clutch to what they once had.

I don't agree with all of the far-flung metaphysics of Saunders' novel, but I do think one foundational idea rings true. Woe to those of us who allow our lives to be fundamentally shaped by our inner bookkeepers. For when we seek to define our relationships and our lives as a series of debits and credits, we will never begin to get a hint of understanding about God's gracious invitation to us.

These little ones we just baptized, David and Georgina, Caroline and Frederick, were not born with some blank spreadsheet in some divine office by which their lives will be measured as their days unfold and they do good and bad things. Instead their names have been etched upon an invitation beckoning them to find a home in God's love. And there is nothing these babies can do throughout their lives that will rescind that invitation. There is no series of actions by which God will stop inviting. There is no deadline after which the invitation is null and void.

The only way we lose out on this is if we are so busy grumbling and complaining that we never return for the reward being offered to us. Like the older brother of the prodigal son, we are being enthusiastically called into the party. We are the only ones who have the power to keep ourselves out. So do we keep clutching our twigs and pebbles and dead-bird parts, carefully measuring out what is due to us? Or do we drop our spreadsheets, pick up a cocktail glass and join the party?

The kingdom of heaven is not about what is owed to us, or what we owe to others. It is not about what is fair. It is about so much more than that.

Thanks be to God. Amen.



¹ Lew, Alan, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, Little, Brown, and Company, New York, 2003, p. 151.

² Saunders, George, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Random House, New York, 2017, p. 81.