

“That Time Jesus Told a Joke”

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Today's scripture passage is one of the more perplexing ones. Jesus tells a parable that sounds like it is celebrating dishonesty. The hero of the story is a lying manager who deliberately cooks the books when reporting to the owner how much his clients owe. What's more, he commits this fraud to curry favour with the people who owe money. He's too lazy to work or beg, so he wants people to invite him over for dinner to feed him after he gets fired. It sounds like everything we know has been turned upside down. So what's going on?

We should remember that this is a parable. It is a story that is not meant to be realistic, but to take our minds to a kind of parallel plane of reality. Parables are parabolic - they leave reality for a while, and then come back down. So never expect a parable to be totally realistic.

In today's parable, the owner is not acting like a normal owner. We recognize the dishonest manager, he seems entirely realistic. But the peasants who owe him - how could they get into a position of owing 900 gallons of olive oil, or 1000 bushels of wheat? You could feed an entire city with that much. So, the amounts are extravagant. And yet, Jesus chooses wheat and oil very specifically in this parable. So, let's think about them for a moment.

Take olive oil. What do we mean when we say we have some olive oil?

Olive oil ingredients 1

Well, if you look at the ingredients, this bottle simply says that it contains extra virgin olive oil. That doesn't really tell us much.

So what does it take to make olive oil? (hold up an olive) Well, it starts with olives of course. They are picked from an olive tree, either by hand or using machines. Olives are the savoury seeds of the olive tree. They have a solid seed inside the softer flesh, which is juicy and tastes like summer. How does an olive get like that? Well, it grows on an olive tree, which are usually found in sunny climates in the Mediterranean. The reason olives taste like summer is because the olive tree needs lots of sunlight to grow. They require at least 6-8 hours of full sunlight a day. They also need water - from rain and from groundwater beneath them. They need sandy soil. They also need olive trees of different varieties nearby to produce a good crop, due to cross-pollination. Olive trees rely on the wind to spread their pollen, and to a lesser extent, bees.

So, if one were to put an honest list of ingredients onto an olive oil bottle, it might look like this:

Olive oil ingredients expanded.

Ingredients: Olives, other olive trees, other olive trees of a slightly different species, soil, a medium sized star 93 million miles away, water from rain clouds and underground water from ancient lakes and glaciers, and wind generated by land masses heating up hundreds of kilometres away. All of these are needed to create the olive oil.

Interbeing slide

The late Buddhist leader Thich Nat Hanh has a useful term for this. He suggests that we use the word “Interbeing”. It means that when we see any object or life form, we should recognize that it does not exist on its own, isolated from the rest of the world. It depends on everything around it to exist.

The olive oil is a state of interbeing with sunshine, rain water, Mediterranean soil, the sweat of farmers, the labour of track drivers and the people on the ships who brought it across the ocean. Without any of these, the olive oil would not be here. This bottle of olive oil relies on all these relationships, indeed, it is all these relationships, even though they are invisible.

And of course, none of this interbeing would be possible if olive trees didn’t produce a lot of olives. If each olive tree only produced ten olives, we probably wouldn’t use olive oil at all. Fortunately for us, olive trees are incredibly fertile.

17,500

A mature olive tree can produce up to 17,000 olives in a single season. The olive tree only needs a few olives to reproduce itself, the rest are extra, for other species to enjoy. Olive trees are not alone in this generosity.

Oak

Here in Canada, oak trees can produce 10,000 acorns in a good season.

Apple

An apple tree can produce up to 800 apples a year. Plants usually produce far seeds and fruit more than they need to survive.

The natural world is built on the principle of abundance and generosity. But we humans lose sight of this. In recent centuries we have been encouraged to see the world as being defined by scarcity, not abundance. Thomas Hobbes famously declared that life is nasty, brutish and short. Darwin said that evolution is driven by survival of the fittest, that nature is basically a state of warfare and scarcity. But modern ecologists now argue that nature is better defined as relying on co-operation more than competition.

Our ancestors understood this idea of interbeing and abundance. It survives in many old nursery rhymes that we teach to children when they are young. You may remember the old song, "The Farmer in the Dell." Feel free to sing along:

The farmer in the dell, the farmer in the dell,

Hi ho! the Derry O! The farmer in the dell.

The farmer takes a wife, the farmer takes the wife,

Hi ho! the Derry O! The farmer takes the wife.

The wife takes the child, the wife takes the child.

Hi-ho, the derry-o! The wife takes the child.

In that song, each verse introduces a relationship. The farmer takes a wife, then in the next verse, the wife takes a child, then the child takes a nurse, then the nurse takes a cow (for milk), the nurse takes a dog (for protection) , the dog takes a cat (for fun) , the cat takes a mouse (for food) , the mouse takes some cheese. The song captures this long chain of interbeing and generosity, as each person and the animals depend on something else to thrive. Other nursery rhymes capture this interbeing, too. You may remember the like the old lady who ate a fly, I don't know why she swallowed a fly, perhaps she'll die. Then she ate a spider who wriggled and jiggled inside her , and so on with other creatures who chase the previous creatures. These old songs capture the idea that no creature or person stands alone. We all live because we are reliant on relationships with other beings. God has created a natural system where abundance and generosity is the norm.

That idea can help us understand today's strange parable. Jesus tells the story of the dishonest manager to some Pharisees. They are known for being very pious, pious to a fault. They act like every day is temple day. They stay pure all the time, and then insist that everyone else make as many sacrifices as they can at temple. For poor people, those sacrifices were made with wheat and oil.

Jesus has a problem with the Pharisees. He admires their devotion to God, but he thinks they are forgetting something important. So he tells a parable about this dishonest manager, whose clients owe his boss a lot of oil and wheat. Huge amounts, impossible amounts. And this dishonest manager is lazy. He doesn't want to work for a living if he gets fired. So, he tells the peasants to cheat, to lie about how much they owe. Instead of giving the owner 900 gallons of olive oil, give him half. Same with the wheat. And because he lies about their debts, these people will invite the lying, cheating manager over for dinner in gratitude. And the big surprise of the parable is that the owner doesn't mind. Which seems really strange since it's pretty obvious

that the owner is supposed to be God. How could God approve of the actions of this lying, lazy manager?

Consider this: what if God is less like an uptight owner, and more like the God who created the olive tree? A God who has created a world based on abundance and sharing? Where the best possible thing humans could do is take the wheat and the oil God has created, and share it with each other?

Jesus tells this story as a joke. He's saying, you know what Pharisees? When I look around this world, I see lying, cheating managers getting closer to God's way than you do. You want to be God's people, then spend less time worrying about being so pious, and spend more time sharing God's bounty with the people around you. Go to dinner with them, have a laugh, love each other, giving thanks to God who creates the oil and wheat, and every other kind of food.

Does this mean that we should not go to temple, not go to church? No, in the parable, the peasants still owe the owner some of the wheat and oil, it's not all written off. The fact is, in a world where a single olive tree can produce 17000 olives for us to enjoy, we are all in debt to God more than we could ever repay. But that's okay. God doesn't want it all back. God wants us to have a good time, share the wealth with each other, be God-like with each other, even with the people we may not like, people like that shift manager. Be the people of the people of the olive tree, which shares its bounty and does not hoard it.

We are invited to worry less about how much we have, and focus more on what we have been given. We should worry less about how to be perfect, and put more energy into rejoicing in what God has created, and share it with others, so all can have a good life. It's a message that to the greedy and selfish sounds like a joke. And that may be the best way to hear this wonderful message - as a way of making us laugh with delight. God wants us all to have a good life, one shared with everyone, including the poor and even the dishonest. And Jesus doesn't mind telling a weird joke to get us there. Amen.