

September 24, 2023

Exodus 16:2-15

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-15

Sermon for September 24

## **EQUALITY OF OUTCOME**

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts...” says the Lord.

For many people, one of the great difficulties surrounding the story of Christ’s life, especially as that life drew to a close, might be summarized by this single question. Why were the religious authorities who maneuvered to have him killed so mad at him? After all, here was someone who was obviously a profoundly good, a profoundly intelligent, a profoundly impressive and a profoundly generous man, someone whose miracles were all miracles of healing and provision, and whose teaching and preaching were basically about God’s love for all.

The Gospel accounts are full of cases where Pharisees and likeminded Jewish religious authorities are offended by Jesus eating and hanging out with sinners or ritually unclean people and offended when he heals people on the Sabbath. You might disagree with the teaching of such an individual, but how could that religious disagreement possibly fan into a furious hatred that would cry out for his death?

This is in fact a very difficult and complicated question, and we cannot hope to address it fully in one morning. But what I would like to do this morning is to try to tease out one strand of an explanation, a strand that might make the hatred a little more understandable, and possibly even more relatable.

As we all know, we live these days in a politically fractured world. That’s of course always been the case throughout human history, but the modern world presents an interesting example of a kind of fracturing that really is pretty much without precedent. It’s what I call a moral fracturing, and let me explain what I mean by that.

In modern political thinking, especially in Western civilization and the countries that have gained their moral shape from the essentially Christian influences at the heart of Western civilization, there's a general moral agreement that political systems, governments, should be fair and just, and that fairness and its legal expression, justice, should lie at the heart of what the political machinery of a society should promote.

That belief, that conviction, is something that almost everyone has in common, from ordinary citizens like you and me all the way up to the architects of our societies, the intellectual writers and politicians: all of them at least purport to be working for the construction of a fair society. (Remember, we're talking about the ideal here, not necessarily the reality.) To put it another way, they all think that morality is important, and that society should be constructed and regulated in the morally best way.

But now, here's where we find the fracture. The fracture is between those who believe and argue that the morally best society is one in which steps are taken to ensure equality of opportunity; and those who believe and argue that the morally best society is one in which steps are taken to ensure equality of outcome.

Let me give you a very crude illustration drawn from actual dynamics at work in our school systems these days. Imagine a classroom full of 14 year-olds at the beginning of the school year studying algebra.

There are those who would say that the most important thing is that all the students be given the same opportunity – the same books, the same amount of time and attention, the same instruction – and that whatever happens after that is, morally speaking, for the best. Of course, typically what will happen is that some students will do better than others in mastering algebra, as reflected in the test scores at the end of the year, and they will receive the rewards of having done better – they'll move on to calculus, and so on. Fairness, in this way of thinking, is achieved or satisfied by the equality of opportunity, and that's what the school governance should seek to provide.

On the other hand, there are those who say that the most important thing, morally speaking, is that the students all achieve equality of outcome, that the school system be structured and governed in such away as to ensure that the school doesn't produce students who are elevated over their peers, but rather in which they all share roughly similar rewards.

Now, of course, translate this homely little illustration into the great political and economic systems of our day, and you get a pretty good idea of what separates them. On the one hand, you have the so-called capitalist systems, that find their moral basis in providing equality of opportunity to all, and then let whatever happens after that happen.

On the other hand, we have the socialist systems that find their moral basis in working to ensure equality of outcome, so that, at the end of the day, no one enjoys far greater material benefit than anyone else. The moral conviction that underlies these systems is that fairness is best manifested in policies and modes of governance that assure equality of material outcome for all citizens.

Now I didn't spend the time this morning talking about this fracture in order to spark a political debate – as we all know, in this church, politics stops at those outside double doors, preferably beyond the gravel parking area.

I brought up the fracture, so I can point out that a parallel fracture can be found throughout Christian history, a deep and profound difference in the way of understanding both the Gospel of Christ, and the work that Christ accomplished here on earth, concluding with his death on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension, and his reality as our living Lord and Savior.

Here's what I'm referring to. Throughout Christian history, there have been those who understood that what Jesus accomplished was to provide equality of opportunity, and others who believed that what he accomplished was to provide equality of outcome.

Now, it's undoubtedly true that for most of Christian history, especially after the first couple of centuries, the predominant view of all the major churches and denominations of Christianity has been that what Jesus accomplished was to provide equality of opportunity, and that that is still the predominant view right down to the present day. Put in the most general, what this view says is basically that Jesus opened the way to heaven to everyone, but that it is then up to them to take advantage of that opening. Different Christians will have different opinions about what that taking advantage amounts to, and those opinions fall along a range. At one end of the range, some will contend that all it requires is that someone have a certain belief or a certain mental state of acceptance of Jesus as Lord or Saviour or that they merely answer an altar call or something along those lines; and at the other end of the range are those who argue that people must radically change their

lives, abandon the pursuit of worldly rewards and devote themselves to the service of others.

Setting aside the differences between these different interpretations of what Christ accomplished, what they have in common is that Christ, because of what he accomplished, offers the same opportunity to everyone to gain eternal companionship with God, but that it is then up to them what they make of that opportunity.

To use a different image, according to this way of thinking, Jesus essentially created a level playing field, and from then on, it's up to the players. And just as in the schoolroom example, under such conditions, some will rise and some will fall behind; although here, on the level playing field of spiritual decision-making, those who rise gain heaven's rewards, and those who fall behind are cast into the outer darkness.

As I said, in one form or another, this way of understanding Christ's accomplishment has largely prevailed throughout Christian history. But alongside, there has always been a minority current of Christian reflection that sees Christ instead as having accomplished what we might refer to as equality of outcome. The Christian Universalism that Jim and I both espouse is one example of that current. It is the view, essentially, that what Jesus accomplished in his life, death, resurrection and ascension was to pay the sin debt of everyone unconditionally, that he bore the punishment that everyone deserves, and thus qualified everyone for all time for a life in the eternal presence of God the Father. On the cross, Christ purchased the ticket for everyone for entrance through the Pearly Gates.

Now, obviously this is not the time or place to resolve the disagreement between these two understandings of Christ's achievement. I'm talking about it today only because I think it might help us to understand the murderous intensity of the opposition that Jesus' teaching provoked, as the nature of that teaching became clear. Here's what I mean.

When I present the theory of Christian Universalism to someone who's not familiar with it, almost invariably these are the sorts of questions that immediately rise:

*Do you mean to tell me that my drunken neighbor who beats his wife and abuses his daughters is going to heaven? Do you mean to tell me that that monster who stabbed the woman to death in the Walmart parking lot as part of a gang initiation is going to heaven? Do you mean to tell me that the deranged lunatic who lined up*

*those Amish schoolgirls and shot them all dead is going to heaven? Do you mean the 9/11 hijackers are going to heaven? Do you mean Adolph Hitler, who was personally responsible for forty million good lives being destroyed, that that human demon is going to heaven?*

And if I say, Yes, that is what I mean to tell you, then you begin to understand how that way of understanding Jesus can serve to violate our moral sense of justice and fairness at the deepest possible level. It certainly violates my sense of justice. You might even be tempted to say, as someone once said to me: “I could never believe in, honor, or worship a God who would allow such a thing.”

But now, is that what Jesus actually taught God is like? That’s a question we must all come to grips with, and I can’t answer it for you. What I can do is say that it might provide at least part of the answer why the Pharisees and others truly hated and despised what Jesus taught, when it became clear what it was, why they could never believe in, honor or worship him, or the God he claimed to represent. Their moral sensibilities were just as appalled as those asking the hypothetical questions I mentioned a moment ago, just as appalled as yours might be, just as appalled as mine in fact are. Equality of outcome in an algebra class is one thing; but equality of outcome in matters of eternity between the good and the bad, between saints and sinners, that’s outrageous, that’s unacceptable that’s just beyond the pale.

Which brings us to the parable in our lectionary reading for this morning. It’s a parable that I personally find to be perhaps the most remarkable of all the parables, despite its seeming simplicity, because it does indeed seem to suggest that God’s ways are not our ways. And as I read the parable in closing, I would ask you to imagine yourself as one of the workers hired early in the morning, and ask yourself whether you wouldn’t be just as upset, just as morally outraged as they are. And then listen at the end to what Jesus quotes the landowner as saying. And surely, at that point, we are led to remember what God said through the prophet Isaiah:

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Matthew 20: 1-15

And so our prayer, this morning, heavenly father, is not that we may understand thy thoughts, but that we may share thy thoughts, not that we may understand thy ways, but that we may conform to them, not that we understand thy will, but that we accept thy will, for Jesus taught us to pray **Thy will be done**, and we pray for these things in his name.