

## **“God Doesn’t Play Zero Sum Games”**

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Based upon Jonah 3:10 - 4:11; Matt. 20:1-16

“Dear Carolyn,” read a letter to the advice columnist Carolyn Hax this past week in THE WASHINGTON POST. “A long-time friend has developed a habit of saying, ‘God is good’ and ‘I’m so blessed’ when delivering good news about herself, her family achievements, etc.... It seems to me the implication is, ‘I’m so much more fortunate than you are.’ She has just come through a particularly bad spell during which I was her confidant.... However, now that the sun is out on her side of the street and current difficulties have cast a shadow on my side, instead of a show of support, I hear the whole ‘blessed’ thing. My initial reaction is to respond, ‘Well aren’t you special.’”<sup>1</sup> The letter then went on to ask Carolyn how the writer could politely brush off his or her friend for being so insulting. Carolyn reacted by gently suggesting that the letter writer might have been misunderstanding the woman’s motivation. She may have been expressing grateful humility, rather than in-you-face-arrogance and selfishness. “Why don’t you take the time to find out what the friend actually meant before dismissing her out of hand for being insulting?” she suggested. I had the same thought. But my second thought was, “This is a classic example of zero sum bias.”

“Zero sum bias” is a cognitive bias that makes people see situations as “zero sum games” that really are not. In game theory, a “zero sum game” is a competitive game in which for every positive outcome, there must be a corresponding negative one so that everything balances out in the end. In other words, if someone is to win, someone else must lose. In zero sum games, the resources are limited, so although one may be able to trade “this” for “that,” in the end the amount of “that” is insufficient for everybody to have as much as they desire. When this kind of thinking steps into our way of seeing the world, it can create “zero sum bias,” which leads people to think in terms of winners and losers, superiors and inferiors, blessed and unblessed for all kinds of situations. Thus, every time the letter writer’s friend said, “I’m so blessed,” he or she heard “and you are so not... nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah” implied.

Now maybe the friend was actually gloating about her good fortune. I don’t know. But I do know that as people of faith, we need to watch out for zero sum bias because when it comes to allocating divine blessings, God does not play zero sum games. Today’s Scripture lessons make that clear. Consider the story of Jonah, the famously reluctant prophet. This story is what Jewish scholars call didactic fiction. It’s a tale that teaches, not an historic account of how a human being actually managed to survive inside a sea creature for three days, or how a city dressed its animals in sackcloth. The story begins with God calling Jonah to go to Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria, Israel’s enemy, and tell the people that they needed to repent, or God would smite them. Jonah didn’t want to, ran away, and ended up having a three-day time-out in the belly of fish as a result. After the fish coughed him up, Jonah seemed to have learned his lesson about disobeying the will of God and did as he was told. He went to the city and preached the shortest and perhaps least heart-felt sermon of all time: “Repent or you’re all

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<sup>1</sup> *Dear Carolyn*, THE WASHINGTON POST, Sept. 16, 2020, C8.

doomed.” Miraculously, the people listened and repented to the degree that God decided not to destroy them. You would think Jonah would be happy with his great success, but he wasn’t. As he told God, after going outside the city to sulk, Jonah didn’t want Nineveh saved. This is why he ran away in the beginning, not because he was afraid of the Ninevites, but because he knew that God was loving and merciful and would probably end up forgiving them. Jonah didn’t want this; he wanted Israel to win and Assyria to lose. That was justice to him. If God would forgive the Ninevites, then God wasn’t just. If God would bless both nations, then God wasn’t righteous. Someone had to lose in order for someone to win, and in order for the terms justice and righteousness to mean anything. Israel couldn’t believe it was specially blessed if its enemy was specially blessed as well.

Although Jonah comes across in the story as a bitter, self-absorbed anti-prophet, he has still been seen as a very sympathetic figure for centuries. We sympathize with how scary it must have been to go into the heart of enemy territory because few of us would have the courage to do that. But most of all, we sympathize with Jonah’s zero-sum-bias-inspired resentment, because in our culture we share that bias about a whole variety of situations. One of those situations is in the realm of politics. We don’t all agree on who the bad guys are, but most people agree that there are political good guys and bad guys. How can God be good and just if God doesn’t want to smite the ones that we want smote? The thought that God loves “them” as much as us is repulsive.

If you feel that way, and/or if *Jonah* leaves you feeling frustrated and confused, then I suspect that today’s Gospel lesson will only make that frustration worse. It seems patently unfair to pay people who work all day in the hot sun the same amount as those who work only an hour. Most people think that to do so is both insulting to those who worked so hard, and bad business because it rewards people for working less. But the vineyard owner in this story disagrees. He gently chastises the complainers who express our perspective, in much the same way God chastises Jonah. “Am I not allowed to do whatever I want with what belongs to me? Didn’t everyone get what was promised to them? Why are you so envious because I am generous?” “I’ll tell you why,” the day workers in the story and we, in our hearts, respond: “‘You have made them equal to us!’ In order for the math to work and for the world to be just, those who work more should be paid more. That’s just good business.”

There are two main ways to understand this challenging parable. The most popular way is to approach it as a theological allegory about salvation, not an economics lesson. By sharing this parable, Jesus was telling his followers that God was more gracious than we are. God, the vineyard owner, wants everyone to be saved, and will keep going to the marketplace again and again to ensure that everyone ultimately is. The day laborers are the ones who recognize the gospel early and set out to serve the Lord. The latecomers are the ones who recognize God in their lives at the last hour. Since saving grace is God’s alone to extend or withhold, it is God’s prerogative to save whomever God pleases with it whenever God pleases. This does not invalidate the good work of the day laborers, however. It just makes clear that salvation isn’t something you work for, it’s something God gives. God is an absurdly generous vineyard owner who wants everyone to be blessed regardless of how much time they have spent in the vineyard.

The other way to interpret this parable is to stick with the economic context, and recognize that this is a lesson from the God who loves the “least of these,” about the differences between the world’s fairness-based economy, and God’s need-based economy. In the world, fairness is measured by merit— what you have earned. Since everyone has a chance to work all day, people should be paid for how much they actually work. In God’s economy, in contrast, fairness is measured according to whether everyone’s needs are met. Everyone needs to work and receive a daily wage, but that doesn’t mean that everyone has equal opportunity to work because the systems of the world are unjust. God recognizes that the men who worked only a fraction of the day were not to blame for not being able to find work earlier. God also recognizes that they couldn’t go home and pay only a fraction of their bills even if they could find work for only a fraction of the day. So, God chooses to meet everyone’s needs equally.

In this interpretation, the ability to labor in the vineyard is a perk, not a punishment or the price of admission. The day laborers should recognize that they are blessed, even privileged to be able to spend the whole day in God’s vineyard. They get to spend more time with God! Those who are hired last get their daily needs met but miss out on the satisfaction of getting to work with God to create something wonderful. So, no one was taking advantage of the day workers, nor were their labors pointless. They were doubly blessed, receiving a day’s work and a day’s pay; meanwhile the others could go home and rejoice that even though the world was unjust, God still made sure they received their “daily bread.”

Is it easier for you to set aside your zero-sum bias if the subject is salvation, politics, or economics? We all have different triggers which kick us into zero-sum-bias mode. For some, the idea that God wants to save everyone is easier to stomach than God’s idea of equal pay for unequal labor. For others, the use of resources to meet everyone’s needs is not the problem, but the idea that God would love and/or forgive those on the other side of the political aisle, or those who do them or their world harm is unacceptable. Whatever triggers you most, listen again to how God responds to the triggered people in these stories. “Shouldn’t I care about the great city of Nineveh in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who don’t know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” God asks Jonah. The unspoken answer is, “of course God should!” Would you want a God that would write off and destroy thousands of God’s children? “Why are you envious because I am generous?” God asks the day workers in the parable. Would we want a God who wasn’t generous? These stories make it clear that regardless of how we feel about them, it isn’t God who is handling these situations incorrectly, we are. We are the ones who are treating God’s grace as if it were our limited resource. We are the ones who are praying God will be generous and forgiving to us, but not to others. We are the ones who insist that we can’t be winners unless someone else loses. If we want to be faithful to God therefore, we are the ones who need to let go of our zero-sum bias and learn to see and celebrate God’s way.

There is a concept in educational circles developed by Carol Dweck called the “growth mindset” that I think may help us to do this.<sup>2</sup> Dweck has argued that students tend to approach

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g., “*Carol Dweck: A Summary of Growth and Fixed Mindsets*,” FS Blog, (Farnham Street Media Inc. 2020), <https://fs.blog/2015/03/carol-dweck-mindset/>; Gross-Loh, Christine, “*How Praise Became a Consolation Prize: Helping children confront challenges requires a more nuanced understanding of the ‘growth mindset’*” THE ATLANTIC, Dec. 16, 2016,

learning with either a “fixed” mindset or a “growth” mindset. Those with fixed mindsets tend to believe that their abilities are carved in stone and fixed from birth. They think “If I can’t do math now, I’ll never be able to do math;” or “If I make a mistake on a test, I am a failure.” Those with growth mindsets, in contrast, see life as an exercise in continuously learning and growing. They believe you can always cultivate new skills and better understanding through effort and perseverance. If you make a mistake on a subject, that’s not a failure; it’s an opportunity to learn. If you don’t understand something, that doesn’t mean you never will. It simply means you have some more work to do on it.

Zero-sum bias and fixed mindsets go together. But grace-inspired bias and growth mindsets do too. So, all we have to do is recognize that being a “disciple” means being a student and use our faith to help us embrace a growth mindset. Instead of clinging to binary, “us vs. them,” or rigid thinking, we need to invite God’s grace to help us grow in our understanding of fairness and mercy, goodness and love. We need to grow in our understanding of the truth that there is enough grace for everyone to be blessed, and enough human sinfulness, that we all should be grateful for God’s mercy. We need to remind ourselves every time we start thinking in a zero-sum way, that God doesn’t play that game. Like the friend in the advice column, we can make this shift by practicing gratitude and humility, recognizing before we judge others how richly we have been blessed. In Christ we have been blessed with a God who loves us as we are and forgives us more times than we can count. In Christ we have been blessed with a God who cares about our needs and values our talents and gave his life to save us. This is not our own doing; it’s a gift we should want everyone to receive.

If we could embrace the theological truth these lessons affirm, that in the kingdom of God, God desires to bless everyone and has enough grace to do so, and if we could practice a growth mindset with regard to politics and economics as a result, think of what might change in our lives and world! I read a study this week examining political ideology that concluded that both “conservatives” and “liberals” demonstrate zero-sum bias way too often now.<sup>3</sup> The study showed that for those who consider themselves conservative, it is challenges to the status quo which provoke it. “Change immigration laws to let in immigrants, and they will take our jobs because there are only so many jobs to go around.” For liberals, it is defense of what they see as an unjust status quo that does it. “If the rich benefit then the poor never will. If it’s pro-business, then it’s anti-environment.” Both sides have become entrenched in winner/loser, binary thinking that isn’t grounded in reality or grace. It’s more than possible to be for racial justice and for supporting police, to be for the poor and the environment and small businesses. No one wins when we insist on a dangerous game of “either/or” instead of “both/and.” At best, we become like Jonah, cursing the world from underneath withered bushes when “the other side” seems to be blessed, and at worst we become competitive to the point of violence, fighting to control resources that God gave us to benefit us all.

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/12/how-praise-became-a-consolation-prize/510845/>

<sup>3</sup> Davidai1, Shai, and Ongis, Martino, “*The Politics of Zero-sum Thinking: The relationship between political ideology and the belief that life is a zero-sum game,*” SCIENCE ADVANCES, ScienceMag.org (AAAS, Dec. 19, 2019), <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/12/eaay3761>

We need to stop doing this and start learning instead how to see the world through God's eyes. A growth mindset says, "Whose needs are not being met in this situation?" not "We can't meet everyone's needs." A growth mindset says, "Who deserves a second chance?" more than it says, "Let's make sure they get what they deserve." The problems of our world do not have simple answers because they are complex problems. If we ever hope to solve them, therefore, we first need to acknowledge that complexity. We need to look for compromises and ways to ensure that even those we deem undeserving can be blessed. So, let us, as people of faith, start this new trend. Let us cast aside our own zero sum thinking, and as God's vineyard workers, tend the kingdom with gratitude, understanding, and grace. Let us rejoice in the fact that our God is steadfast in love and generous in mercy, and practice growing in those traits ourselves until we and everyone we encounter will be able to say with humility and grace, "I feel so blessed! Thanks be to God!" Amen.