

Toward a somersaulting spirit

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I got a delightful report from a colleague's gregarious seven-year-old the other evening about summer church school. When the little girl asked what my favorite Bible story is, I hemmed and hawed. She quickly confessed that hers was Ruth and then dashed outside to demonstrate the back walkover. In the meantime, my colleague confided, "I admit there are some parts of Jesus' teachings that don't seem fair. I understand that they tell about God's grace and forgiveness and all, but frankly, I don't like them."

This parable in Matthew is one of them: field hands who work different hours are paid the same thing. The Prodigal Son parable is another: the irresponsible son gets a big party with fanfare while the conscientious and hard-working son is left asking, "What am I, chopped liver?" It's unsettling for those of us who have tried to do the right thing, to be self-sufficient and make contributions to our families and communities. We understand the bit about the generosity of God's grace and forgiveness. We don't pretend to be flawless or exceptional. But what about accountability and justice? Don't these stories send a message that you can do whatever you please, do as little as you like (or nothing at all), and God will still reward you in the end?

Maybe Jesus is saying: go outside and do back walkovers. Throw yourself into what you love or simply what you do. Let God sort out the rest. It's not your problem, and that's a gift unto itself. And if you should happen to find yourself on the wanting end of what's deserved, God's loving hand extended is gift indeed.

But even more radical than this message of God's generosity, perhaps, is a quiet, secondary message of these parables, as understated as their responsible characters. Namely, we who are trying and doing and being as well as we can, already have it all at our fingertips. All the time. Our rightful wages (in the language of today's parable) are an absolute certainty. Our inheritance (in the language of the

Prodigal Son) is ever before us, for the asking and for the taking, any time, anyhow. Is it possible that by looking at what others get, we are blind to what we have? In critically contemplating God's grace for others, we stub our toes on the grace that is ever before us. What exuberant lives are ours! Right now and evermore. Cartwheels and somersaults, the cup runneth over.