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Strange Fruit and Family Connections
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The song *Strange Fruit* has been called the “song of the twentieth century” although sadly it has not lost any relevance in the twenty-first century. It is considered one of the most important songs ever written and recorded; a song about the lynching of Black people in the south, it is also considered the first protest song and the song that started the civil rights movement. Most people know the song was first recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939, a time when the country didn’t talk about the history of slavery, the cruel injustice of Jim Crow Laws and the brutal, violent treatment of Black Americans, much less put that painful reality to song. But what I recently discovered was how this historic recording has a surprising family connection to another Billy: actor and comedian Billy Crystal.

In his one man show he called *700 Sundays*, Billy Crystal talked about his funny, loving, supportive, creative, and complex family which consisted of relatives and the amazing jazz musicians – many of whom were Black -- of the era who were part of his family because of the family business. His uncle Milt was the celebrity in the family when Billy was a little boy, because his uncle started the family business: the Commodore Music Shop in New York City where he recorded, produced, and sold jazz music in the 1930’s. Some of the greatest musicians of the day frequented that shop, including the indomitable Billie Holiday.

Legend has it, Billie Holiday had heard and performed the song *Strange Fruit* and wanted to record it, but her record company refused to do so because they were afraid of the response from people in the south. So, Billie Holiday went to her friend Milt Gabler, Billy Crystal’s uncle, and sang the song for him. With tears in his eyes, Milt said the song needed to be recorded and helped Billie Holiday get permission from her record company to record one song on his label, Commodore Records. That is how history was made and a movement began on April 20, 1939 when Billie Holiday recorded *Strange Fruit* at the Commodore Music Shop.

The song has had such a powerful impact on the civil rights movement and on so many people, I suspect the world would be less hopeful if it had never been recorded. The song speaks a hard and horrible truth to our world, and when we can hear the truth, then there is room for love, room for repentance, and room for hope and change. That song might not have been recorded if a white man hadn’t recognized the need to make room for the truth in the song. To this day, Billy Crystal is proud of his family’s connection to the historic and important song.

Such room making was lost on the characters in the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel. When looking at parables, it is important to remember they are stories Jesus told to get his listeners, whether it was his disciples, the crowds he spoke to, or those of us who follow him today, to learn to recognize the difference between God's kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of power, violence, and oppression we often choose to make and live into. Parables give us the opportunity to look at things from a different perspective, a different point of view.

Usually most folks listen to this parable through the eyes of the workers who have been at work since early in the morning, the ones who complained against the landowner at the end of the day when the money was passed out. Pay attention if you find it easy to relate to this perspective, because it might seem like a reasonable place to be coming from, but it unfortunately misses the point of the landowner's generosity, what Jesus said was like the kingdom of heaven at the start of today's Gospel.

Complaints can be like that. They can blind us to the larger picture because they keep us centered on ourselves, especially comparing ourselves to others, and the fight to get what we believe we deserve we have coming to us, even it separates us from them. And what was the complaint the workers had? Was it the different amounts of time others had worked? No, the workers complained about equality: "you have made them equal to us" the workers in today's parable said.

Equality can be a controversial concept in our world. Some people say it is necessary for justice, others say it is an unattainable goal. Have you ever been in a situation where you were equal? Not above or below; not judged by your race, gender, age, or experience? Where you were respected for simply being part of something everyone contributed to, and if someone lacked what was necessary to contribute, they were given what was needed?

I have. Although I didn't start out as equal. Through generosity, I became equal. I was part of a 4-person team that started what is now a national ministry of the Episcopal Church called *Living Compass*. Today it consists of materials and websites and trainings and consultations. But before you could google the name, it was an idea I was invited to help grow and expand into something that could help individuals and parishes grow closer to God and each other. The team met weekly. We figured out what materials to produce, how to share those materials and teachings, and make connections throughout the church. Even though I was the youngest person on the team, I was never looked down on for my age. Or my gender. My ideas and thoughts were given equal value, even to the person who put the team together.

However, everyone on the team used Apple computers, except me. It concerned the team because my Microsoft documents couldn't always be opened on their computers, and they didn't want me to be disadvantaged. So, without any fanfare, I was given a MacBook so I could communicate on the same level as everyone else. In addition to this, all of us were given credit cards to use when we traveled for work and we were all given new iPads because one person had one, found it so helpful, it was believed all of us having one would help all of us in our work. But equality didn't come out of the stuff.

I have never forgotten how generosity was used to make me equal with the rest of the team; generosity removed my disadvantages and liberated me to be more creative, more supportive of my fellow teammates, and gave me a taste of what Jesus may have meant in today's parable where a landowner used generosity to make everyone equal.

Instead of focusing on the folks who complained, perhaps it would behoove us to consider the folks who had the disadvantage of not working the entire day. We get very uptight about who deserves what, but what if we thought about it in a different way? What if we thought about making room for all the laborers – who are all people -- in the parable, perhaps it would make for better people who will focus on the work and doing the best they can instead of focusing on fighting each other for the most stuff.

Remember this parable is about the kingdom of heaven, not the kingdom of greed or corruption or violence, or what we deserve, and in this parable not only did everyone get paid the same, the order of payment was reversed. Jesus ended this parable by saying, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Perhaps Jesus was suggesting the kingdom of heaven doesn't look like what we think we deserve or expect, it is instead a reversal of such expectations. Instead, perhaps God's kingdom operates with the currency of generosity, and God uses generosity to make room for everyone so that everyone has the opportunity to contribute what God has given us.

That is what happened when Billy Crystal's uncle Milt made room for one of the most powerful songs of truth telling to be recorded 81 years ago.

Today the Ohio Council of Churches invited all churches in the state to observe Anti-Racism Sunday. It is a day intended for all churches to state clearly racism is a sin and has no part in the Gospel. Racism is a sin because it denies humanity and dignity to all human beings dearly beloved by God and created in God's image. Racism is a sin because it is not loving our neighbors and it is not loving God in whose image our neighbors are also made. Which makes racism an

act of rebellion against God. Although Black people and people of color are the most obvious people to suffer because of racism, this sin has hurt white people too. White people demean and dehumanize ourselves by demeaning and dehumanizing people because of the difference in skin color; thinking they deserve more or others should suffer discrimination because of the color of skin. We all are less than we can be and fail to live into God's kingdom of heaven when we engage in such beliefs and behaviors and when any of us raise our voices to complain about what we think we may be losing when efforts toward equality are made.

This can be a very sensitive issue. But it is also important, even if it is a painful truth to acknowledge. The truth is, it isn't enough to say racism is bad, sinful, and contrary to God's Kingdom. We are all, despite our skin color, to live generously, to do what someone once did for me, and Billy Crystal's uncle did for Billie Holiday, to make room for each other. This means listening to each other's life stories and listening to the experiences of people who are different from us, even if we don't like what we hear. It means accepting invitations to enter into another's suffering and acknowledging the strange fruit that frighteningly can still be found today. And by being in what theologian James Cone called those moments of "terrible beauty" to look upon what is hard to look at and in so doing recognize the humanity we all share, the belovedness of God we all share, and realize hurting someone of a different race means hurting ourselves, like the complainers in the parable. It means recognizing how racism has been institutionalized and how it rears its ugly head even in this pandemic where the COVID-19 virus has had an unequal impact on people of color. And look for ways to make changes that create equality, even if doing so creates more suffering.

Through suffering together, we can begin to heal together, and that is where God's kingdom, what Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community begins and grows. This is where hope lives, the kind of hope that overcomes despair, because it lives in the family of God. A family as funny, loving, creative, supportive, daring, beautiful, and complex as the one Billy Crystal grew up in and whose stories might reveal surprising connections to each other, connections that can give hope to the world, not just on Anti-Racism Sunday, because this isn't work for one day, but a generous and truly Godly way to live every day.