Creation 3 - "Jesus Invites us Out Of The Tragedy of the Commons"

There is a modern parable called The Tragedy of the Commons. It imagines a field held in common. Four farmers each put 1 cow into the commonly held pasture. The pasture land can handle this and regrows. Everyone is equal, happy, and in balance.

Trouble begins when one of the farmers realizes that a fifth cow could fit in the pasture. Conveniently, his extra cow could fit. So he adds a second cow. Everything seems okay - but his neighbours ask - why is it he gets twice as much cow and we don't? So one neighbour adds an extra cow. The third neighbour realizes at the end of the year their cow is skinner than normal. So the next year they add an extra cow to make up. The following year the fourth neighbour's cow is REALLY skinny at the end of the that year and the fourth neighbour realizes they're going to starve unless they, too, put in another cow.

If you're counting, now everyone has 2 cows in the commons. The pasture can't handle it - the grass all dies - the cows all die - and the people are left panicking and asking "How did this happen?"

The fourth neighbour only did what their neighbours did, and yet got the blame. The third neighbour only added a cow because their single cow wasn't as fat as they used to be. The second neighbour added a cow because the first neighbour did. The first neighbour added a cow because there was enough room for a fifth cow.

Who do you blame?

The entrepreneur, the copycat, the one trying to survive, the one starving? Each are innocent and each are guilty in their own ways.

This parable is frequently used in environmental studies to explain pollution. Before 1970, water was a commons around here. Everyone could use as much as they wanted, how they wanted, and it was assumed water always can handle the use. So we used water to drink and bathe and fish, and we also used water to dump our sewage and chemical waste.

But the water couldn't handle that much use. Heavy metals are built up in our fish; turtles are threatened; and many creeks too polluted to drink. Each human was guilty and each human was innocent in different ways of destroying the common held water.

Just like now a days, we are each innocent of the climate crisis- you driving to church today didn't cause this- and we're each guilty of it- me driving to church today contributes to the crisis even just in a tiny bit. Commons are collectives. It is collective action, collective guilt, collective results.

Societies have come up with many different ways to address this Tragedy. You could privatize the commons. This is what Capitalism teaches. Now each farmer is responsible for their own part of land. If they ruin it, that's their own fault. This system has troubles. What happens when a new farmer moves to the area? There is no land to give them. Inequality springs up, and it gets worse over time as one farmer has to sell their land to another - and generational wealth

spreads - and... well... just look at our housing crisis. Renters have a terrible time joining the landed class of land-owners. Additionally, where will the wildlife go? Previously they just crossed the field. Now there are fences. Who accounts for wildlife in our city planning? Who considers the needs of bats when putting lighting in parking lots? The night sky is an unregulated commons at the moment.

So - we move to a mixed system with government, and regulation. That's the system our water is in post 1970. The government regulates how much pollution can go into the water, and by who, and for what purpose. This works only if the regulation accounts for all uses, and gives legal status and rights to non-humans, is not corrupt, and is able to enforce the regulations, and has a way to punish those who violate the regulation. These are all big asks! Although this system is the one we're using, you know and I know it fails to meet all we're asking of it.

So in the gap comes education and morality. Education teaches how one extra cow doesn't seem like much, but leads to the destruction of everything. Morality says as you care for yourself, care for others, and so, do the right thing and think of the whole instead of just yourself.

In a small system, education and morality are very effective. We know we depend on one another. We know we need the health of deer and the health of oaks for the health of ourselves. We know pollution never listens to land title maps and always travels. We know to live with one another, we must love one another.

But in large systems, education and morality break down. What does a polluter three hours, three providences, three countries away care about Bass Lake? They don't have to live with us, and the affects, of the pollution. What do we care about people and animals and nature 3 hours, 3 providences, 3 countries away? It is so remote it doesn't cross our minds. We assume it is well - but I have no idea the working conditions of the people in Mexico who made my clothes. I don't know if the dye poisoned the water there. It's hard to be moral and educated that farther I am from the impact of my choices and actions.

When I hear Jesus' parable of the generous employer or vineyard workers, I hear a story about the tragedy of the commons. The workers who went out early, the go-getters, the entrepreneurs who realized another cow would fit, should get more for their labour. That is fair.

The workers who went out next, who saw another cow fit and asked "why not me?" The ones who did as everyone was doing should get a bit more for they did a bit more. That is fair.

The workers who went last, who didn't add a cow until they were starving, the ones who did the least should get the least. That is fair.

And yet - that is not how the commons, or God, or heaven, works. The climate crisis hits everyone - those who do little and those who do lots. This is our one home. There's no escaping it. It is very unfair that the people who pollute the least are still getting hammered. While the people who pollute the most are not getting the most effects.

And God offers heaven, love, and forgiveness to us whether we have laboured long for God, or whether we've done very little. We all get the same - a "welcome home", a "well done my good and faithful servant," a "you are forgiven, now go and do likewise." And it isn't fair.

It isn't fair that the sun shines on the just and unjust alike.

It isn't fair that good guys, rule followers, don't get ahead like bad guys, rule breakers, do.

Jesus' way out of the Tragedy of the Commons is not to think about what's fair at all. It's to think about what is just.

It is just that all people have a day's living wage.

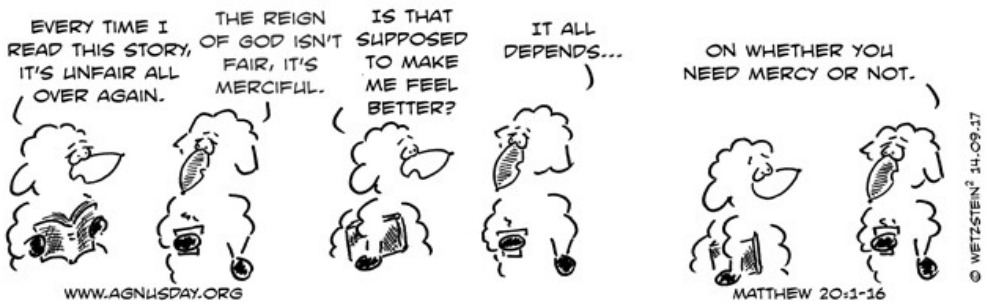
It is just that all nature have protections just like humans.

It is just that we understand ourselves not as individuals, but as a collective. Your success is my success. Your failure is my failure. Your joy my joy. Your sorrow my sorrow. We are in this together.

It is just that God, who loves all, creates all, provides for all.
Human and animal,
Plant and water,
Sky and earth,
Rock and microbe
All.

Jesus' invitation out of the Tragedy is moral – the right thing, the Godly thing, is to act as one. His solution is educational - learn God cares for all. It is regulatory - you can't earn your way into heaven. It is a gift given freely. Nor can you earn a ranking in heaven. All are equal. It is not a privatization solution. For Jesus, against many modern teachings, there is no individual salvation and individual faith. Our faith is one of community, collective, and caring for the least for we all rise or fall together. Our salvation is collective, where we need one another in order to enter the full reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. Collective – and that includes all our relations. All turtles. All life. All creation. We are one.

It is so counter cultural! So against what I've learned and been taught in society! Against what many preachers have even told me. And yet – this I truly believe – we need one another. Jesus said he is present where two or three are gathered in his name. We experience Jesus in the collective. Together. One.
Amen.



Scripture Readings – Sept. 20, 2026 – Little Current UCPC

Matthew 20:1-16 - New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

The Laborers in the Vineyard

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire
laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent
them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the
marketplace, 4 and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is
right.' So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the
same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to
them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' 7 They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'
He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard
said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then
going to the first.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius.

10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also
received a denarius. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,
12 saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have
borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' 13 But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I
am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you
and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.
15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to
me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'
16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."



Psalm 145: 1-8 VU 866

Refrain: We praise you, O God: we bless your holy name.

Every day we will bless you and praise your name forever.
O God, you are great and highly to be praised; your greatness is beyond all measure.
One generation shall praise your works to another, and declare your marvellous deeds.
I will speak of our splendour and glory, and all your wonderful works. *Refrain.*

You, God, are righteous in all your ways, and loving in all your deeds.
You are near to all who call to you, to all who call on you in truth.
You fulfil the desire of those who revere you; you hear their cry and you save them.
You watch over all who love you, but the wicked you will destroy.
My mouth will speak your praise, O God.
Let every creature bless your holy name forever. *Refrain.*

May God's spirit shape our understanding of these words.
And may they awaken in our hearts