

It seems like every time I'm in a situation where I'm in a new group with a lot of people who don't know each other, we go through the same ritual. "Why don't we go around the circle and introduce ourselves and say a little about our backgrounds," the leader will say. Most groups I'm in, I am the only pastor, so I can identify myself in that way. But sometimes I'm in a group where everyone is a pastor and we have to think of some other way of identifying ourselves. We then try to come up with ways we are different from one another – like where we live or what our hobbies are.

It's interesting to observe that the way we identify ourselves is by pointing out how we are different from others. We are trained to look at ourselves through the lens of comparison. We do that because we are all individuals and not mass production items put together on an assembly line. We are each unique and different. (Of course, some of us are more "different" than others.) The fact that each of us is different is something to be celebrated. But how we view these differences can be potentially destructive.

When I was in seminary, I served my internship year at Fox Point Lutheran Church on the north side of Milwaukee. My internship supervisor was Chester Johnson, though everyone called him Chet. I learned many things from Chet and one insight that has stuck with me was when he told me that the most dangerous word in the English language is "compare." His experience was that comparing ourselves to others can only lead to dissension, dissatisfaction, and frustration. He had seen this happen in large congregations that have several staff members where the seeds of dissension were sown when staff members started to compare themselves to their peers, thinking that their talents and contributions to the congregation were more important than those of the rest. He had seen this happen in congregations where members started to compare their pastors and different factions touted one pastor as being superior to another. He had seen this in counseling, when people would come to him for help and their problem was they had little or no self esteem because they perceived themselves as failures compared to everyone else.

"Compare" is a dangerous word. When we compare ourselves to another we use terms like older/younger, richer/poorer, bigger/smaller, better/worse, more/less. The two potential dangers in making comparisons are, on the one hand, self-serving pride, and on the other hand, despair. We see ourselves as being more valuable or less valuable, a success or a failure, when we compare ourselves to others.

I'm not sure what God's native language is – I've always been taught that it is Swedish – but whatever language it is, I do know one thing: the word "compare" is not in God's vocabulary. God does not determine our value by comparing us to others. When God looks at all the people in the world, God sees no distinctions. Everyone is of equal value in God's eyes because God's value is not earned – it is granted, bestowed, freely given. That's a different way of looking at ourselves and those around us than we're used to. To look at the world through God's eyes means to value everyone, regardless of what they do, what they own, what they believe, or where they live.

For most of us, looking at the world in this way does not come easily, but if we work at it and practice, we can start looking at those around us through God's eyes. One of the best textbooks to learn how to do this is in, of all places, a Dr. Seuss book. When my kids were small, one of the rituals we had in our home before going to bed was reading a couple of books. We had several favorite stories and one of them was the Dr. Seuss book called *The Sneetches*, so I got to know it quite well. The story goes like this:

The star-bellied Sneetches had bellies with stars, and the plain-bellied Sneetches had none upon “thars.” But, because they had stars, all the star-belly Sneetches would brag, “We’re the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.” With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they’d snort, “We’ll have nothing to do with the plain-belly sort.”

The plain-belly Sneetches of course got quite depressed – they never got invited to frankfurter roasts or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts. Then one day appeared on the scene Sylvester McMonkey McBean, who put them through his “star-on” machine. The plain-bellied Sneetches now had stars, too, so they yelled at the ones who had stars at the start, “We’ve exactly like you! You can’t tell us apart. We’re all just same now, you snooty old smarties! Now we can go to your frankfurter parties.”

“Good grief!” groaned the ones who had stars at the first. “We’re still the best Sneetches and they are the worst. But now, how in the world will we know,” they all frowned, “if which kind is what, or the other way around?”

Once again to the rescue comes McBean, who invites the star-bellied Sneetches into his “star-off” machine. So now, NOT having stars becomes the status symbol, and the problem begins all over again. But Sylvester McMonkey McBean, being the shrewd businessman that he is, invited the plain-bellied Sneetches, who now have stars, to have theirs removed. With all the jealousy that ensued, you can probably guess that things were soon a horrible mess. All the rest of that day, on those wild screaming beaches, the fix-it-up chappie kept fixing up Sneetches. Off again! On again! In again! Out again! Through the machine they raced round and about again, changing their stars every minute or two. They kept paying money. They kept running through until neither the plain nor the star-bellies knew whether this one was that one...or that one was this one...or which one was what one...or what one was who!

McBean left town that day a rich man, laughing at the Sneetches, figuring they would never learn. But McBean was quite wrong. I’m quite happy to say that the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day, the day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches, and no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches. That day, the Sneetches forgot about stars and whether they had one, or not, upon “thars.”

It took a long time, and a lot of their money, but the Sneetches learned to value themselves not by comparing their differences, but by accepting themselves and each other as they are.

Jesus never told a story about the Sneetches, but his story about the workers in the vineyard is quite similar in its intent. The workers in the parable compared themselves with each other not by the way they looked, as the Sneetches did, but by how long they had worked. Those who had worked longer felt they and their labor were worth more and they should therefore be paid more.

To our way of thinking, they are absolutely right. But this parable is not intended to be a blueprint for labor-management relations, but a story to help us understand God-human relations. The owner of the vineyard paid everyone equally because to him, all were equally valuable. In the same way, we are all equally valuable in God’s eyes. It doesn’t matter how old we are or where we work (or if we have a job at the moment, or if we get a paycheck for the work we do). It doesn’t matter how many talents we have, what we look like, or how much we own. It doesn’t matter what religion we are part of or if we have no religious faith at all. Any way we might have of comparing ourselves to others just does not matter to God. That’s what Jesus means when he says, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” All our categories of comparison disappear in the kingdom of God. God accepts us and loves us. That means we can accept and love ourselves. That means we can begin looking at others as God looks at them, and accept and love them as well.

That’s the kingdom of God breaking in on our lives. That’s the good news. Amen.