

I've been reading a book called *Little Heathens* by Mildred Armstrong Kalish, a retired English professor who grew up near Garrison and whose claim to fame in my family is that she was a year ahead of my Aunt Jeane at UNI. *Little Heathens* is her memoir of growing up on the farm and in a small town during the Depression as part of a hardworking extended family. The book gets its name from a child hearing her elders' vocabulary as single words: hardearnedmoney, adrunkenbum, agoodwoolskirt, and of course littleheathen, which is followed immediately by "A body'd think you had no upbringing. They'd think that you'd been peed on a stump and hatched by the sun." It's no wonder she grew up to be an English professor, with that kind of verbal wealth in her background.

She was a small child when the Depression hit, and a lot of the book is about the thrifty ways her grandparents managed to save enough money every year to pay their property taxes, because if they could not pay the property taxes, they would lose their land and thus their means of feeding themselves. This family didn't earn wages; they produced food and sold enough various goods to purchase what they couldn't make themselves. Had it not been for the need to keep up with the taxes, they could have done very nicely without cash at all, because they were so thrifty and so good at living off the land. Every October the family went and cleaned the graves in the cemetery, then spent the rest of the day picking nuts in the timber, which the children then hulled for days after after feeding and watering the chickens, gathering the eggs, getting the cows up from pasture, slopping the pigs and feeding the calves. That's just the *little* kids' chores. The whole book is basically a description of the chores you did at different times of the year or the day.

As a child, Mildred was relatively free of the worry about survival, and her memories are tender and happy. She says, “the closest I come to Proust’s experience is the joy that comes over me when I conjure up the taste of a sandwich made of homemade bread spread with bacon drippings, topped with the thinnest slices of crisp red radishes harvested from the garden, and sprinkled over with coarse salt.” That’s pretty humble fare, but she was a child and she found it delicious.

The adults, on the other hand, must have worried pretty much non-stop. She says, “It has taken me a lifetime to realize that the Depression and its consequent tragedies were nearly as incomprehensible to the adults as they were to us children. . . . Suddenly, unexpectedly, a family of five was now the responsibility of two old people who had thought they were heading into a comfortable, if frugal, retirement. They must have been scared to death.” It’s that insecurity, along with the ever-present need to be resourceful, that links Mildred’s story to the parable that Jesus tells in Matthew 20.

The parable of the vineyard is about day laborers. They do not own land, so they need cash to pay for their daily bread, and they must depend on landowners to hire them and pay them cash. The longer it takes to get hired, the less they can earn in a day, although their needs remain the same. Some days they may wait all day and never get hired. They can be as thrifty as anybody, but without cash they will go hungry. The daily anxiety must be exhausting and demoralizing.

The parable tells us that the landowner went out several times during the day to get workers for his vineyard. Each time he went out and hired some more, they were offered a full day’s pay, even if they worked only part of the day. What a

relief that must have been. It was a disappointment, though, to those who had been hired first, who thought they'd get *more* than a day's pay when they saw the latecomers paid so well. The landowner met their complaints with the question, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Which in Greek, apparently, is literally "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

By paying all the participants a full day's wages, the landowner is treating all of them as family. That's how family works, right? You all work, adults, teens, and little kids, and you each get a bacon grease sandwich at the end of the day. That's radical for a business, and the question has been raised, in fact, whether the householder would actually have been regarded as having shamed himself for treating others as kin who were not kin.

He treats his workers as kin in the sense of compensating everyone according to their needs—their daily cost of living, as it were. But it may also be that he's treating them as kin by putting them all to work, period. The people who didn't get hired early in the day may have been too old or too young, too small or somehow infirm. Yet he went back and gave jobs to all of them.

One thing that's very clear from *Little Heathen* is that work confers dignity. Mildred tells about haying, an arduous and unpleasant job that took days. The big kids worked up in the barn loft where it was windowless, airless, and excruciatingly hot. The little kids worked in the barnyard, hooking and unhooking the carts from their ropes so the horses could turn around without getting tangled up. "The scorching sun beat down on us all day long as we trod back and forth in the dusty barnyard, and there were times when I thought I might faint. However, we did have

a proud sense of achievement, knowing that we were doing our part in this important venture.”

The owner of the vineyard not only gives the workers security for the day, he gives them the dignity of a job to do. Nobody in this vineyard was useless or second-class; everybody contributed and everybody mattered. When the landowner hires people, he is inviting them to make manifest their worth—worth that had been passed over or devalued by those who had come by earlier in the day and declined to hire them. Now we know that we are dealing with the kingdom of God, because in the eyes of God, everyone *does* have value to contribute.

I struggled with what to say about this passage for a while, because I didn't think I needed to exhort the congregation not to have evil eyes, to avoid envy. But I decided there *is* an exhortation here, and that is to make our world more like the kingdom of God, in which the need is recognized for every person's contribution. God does not run an enterprise in which you have to avoid being the least productive employee or you'll get a pink slip. God's kingdom is more like a Rube Goldberg machine, where you actually need a hamster eating a carrot and a clown riding a unicycle to make everything work. We need to take every opportunity to make the world more like that, sort of a Terry Dembinski project in which a shed eventually gets painted after all the kids have brought their peculiar talents to the task with full vigor and enjoyment and not a moment sooner. In fact, if Crossroads were going to be in a parade, I would lobby for our float to be a Rube Goldberg machine, as a prophetic visual aid for the kingdom of God. The question might arise again, is this an occasion for honor or is it an occasion for shame? And then we

would know that we had indeed done things the way God does them, and give thanks.

Generous God, your kingdom is for all people, despite their circumstances or talents. Give us your creative vision and willingness to play hard and work hard, that we may bring in the richness and mirth of your kingdom. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.