

“Are you envious because I am generous?”

Storytellers exist to surprise us, the way Jesus does in today’s parable. His parable would have been hardly worth telling if it went like this: “Once upon a time a man hired some workers. Those who worked eight hours receive eight dollars; those who worked five hours received five dollars; and those who worked one hour received one dollar.” That’s no story! It’s what you expect. Stories engage us in things unexpected.

To match Jesus’ parable, here’s another example of what I mean: Somerset Maugham’s tale “The Know-All”. It’s about an Asian Indian merchant name Mr. Kelada traveling by liner to Japan. The narrator, who shared a cabin with him, couldn’t stand Kelada because he never stopped chattering about places, plays and politics with the air of an expert. There seemed nothing he’d hesitate to expound upon. One evening the subject of pearls came up. The Japanese were about to produce artificial pearls that were so good they might devalue real ones. With his usual tone of authority Mr Kelada claimed to know all there was to know about pearls; they were in fact his business. He boasted there was no fake pearl he couldn’t detect.

“Aha!” thought Mr. Ramsey, a wealthy American whose shy wife was wearing a string of pearls. “That’s a pretty necklace chain of Mrs. Ramsey, isn’t it?” Mr. Kelada said it was indeed, and probably worth thirty thousand dollars. The American smiled when he revealed his wife had told him she had bought it at a department store for only eighteen dollars. Mr. Kelada winced. The American bet him a hundred dollars the pearls were phony and handed them to Mr. Kelada to examine. Within minutes a smile of triumph spread over Kelada’s face. He was about to speak when he suddenly saw the American’s wife turn pale. There was a desperate appeal in her eyes!

Mr. Kelada stopped and then said, “I was mistaken. It’s a very good imitation. I think eighteen dollars is just about as much as the thing is worth.” All enjoyed his embarrassment - except the narrator who was present later that evening when a note arrived from Mrs. Ramsey returning Kelada’s hundred dollars. The pearls were indeed real and cost much more than eighteen dollars, though her husband would never know it, thanks to Kelada’s nobility.

Then there’s the story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez called “Balthasar’s Marvelous Afternoon” about a poor artisan who made a most palatial bird cage for the son of the wealthy Jose Montiel - only to find out that the father knew nothing about the order. Montiel made a terrible fuss, denied he had any obligation to pay for it. The boy fell to the ground weeping. Balthasar then presented the cage to the boy who arose to embrace it. The father insisted Balthasar take it back. Balthasar said to the boy, “Keep it.” -- and went off to a tavern to celebrate the most pleasant experience he had ever had.

Three stories, including the one by Jesus, which end with a surprise. And what’s the surprise? That we human beings are capable of a generosity, a nobility like unto that of God himself; a sensitivity that could turn our prosaic world inside out, if we would but dare follow our creative hearts.