

KID STUFF
THE ANTS AND THEN GRASSHOPPER
MARCH 12, 2023

We're hearing children's stories in this Lenten series.

Many of the children's stories I learned growing up are from Aesop's Fables.

Aesop's Fables, is a collection of stories credited to Aesop,

who was a slave and storyteller who lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BCE.

The fables originally belonged to oral tradition

and were not collected in writing for some three centuries after Aesop's death.

By that time, a variety of other stories, jokes and proverbs were being ascribed to him,

some of that material was from sources earlier than him,

some from beyond the Greek cultural sphere,

and some added later than his time.

One of the stories thought likely to have really come from Aesop is called *The Ants and the Grasshopper*.

I have a vague memory of my mom reading this story to me.

But it was not a regular part of our repertoire.

Settle in, boys and girls, and let's hear the story.

One bright day in the late autumn a family of Ants were bustling about in the warm sunshine,

drying out the grain they had stored up during the summer,

when a starving Grasshopper,

his fiddle under his arm,

came up and humbly begged for a bite to eat.

"What?" cried the Ants in surprise.

"Haven't you stored anything away for the winter?"

What in the world were you doing all last summer?"

"I didn't have time to store up any food," whined the Grasshopper.

"I was so busy making music that before I knew it the summer was gone."

The Ants shrugged their shoulders in disgust.

"Making music, were you?" they cried.

"Very well; now dance!"

And they turned their backs on the Grasshopper and went on with their work.

Short, sweet, and to the point.

Clearly the story is lifting up the values of

hard work, diligence, forethought, and delayed gratification,

and warning against frivolous irresponsibility and idleness.

As in: Please DO NOT fit the stereotype of

a 28 year-old playing video games in your parents' basement.

Or, in San Antonio, their guest room

Some scholars think the story may have been inspired by

a couple of passages from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs.

In chapter 6 it says,

"Go to the ant, you sluggard;

consider its ways and be wise!

It has no commander,

no overseer or ruler,

yet it stores its provisions in summer

and gathers its food at harvest."

(Pr.6:6-8)

And then in chapter 30 we read,

"Four things on earth are small,

yet they are extremely wise:

Ants are creatures of little strength,

yet they store up their food in the summer...;"

(Pr.30:24-25)

Just for those who are wondering, the other three of the four small things are

the hyrax, the locust, and the lizard,

each having some interesting but unrelated attribute.
 But today, it's the ant we focus on.
 Very small, but very wise, hard working,
 planning ahead by storing up food.

Aesop's story communicates that in a compact way,
 a story that children can remember, and will learn from.

But the end of the story is so abrupt and cold.

They turned their backs on the Grasshopper and went on with their work.

It has bothered people from early on.

Where is the virtue of compassion? Of generosity?

Yes, hard work and forethought are important.

And they are in short supply with some people.

But hard work and planning ahead are not the only values to pursue.

There is compassion, generosity and so much more.

I think of Jesus feeding the hungry crowd on a hillside.

He didn't say,

"You didn't plan ahead. You didn't bring food. Tough luck!"

No, he took a few pieces of bread and fish,

and he shared it with the crowd.

Are we supposed to be like the ants, saying,

"Mr. Grasshopper, dance away your hunger."

Or ought we be more like Jesus?

The singular focus on hard work and diligence is not a recipe for a healthy life.

There's no joy in that.

The workaholic is not a well-rounded person.

There's the old saying, dating all the way back to 1659,

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

And I know that to be true.

My dad grew up in Brownwood, Texas

during the Depression and World War II,

and from a young age always had at least one job,

and during the summer two or three jobs.

Ushering at the movie theater,

digging graves at the cemetery, working on a farm.

And whatever money he made was not for him,

but went into the family kitty to help pay for basics.

As an adult he was totally work-focused.

Oh, family was important,

so he was home for dinner most evenings.

But all the dinner table conversation was about work,

unless he was asking us how things were at school.

Not about our friends, not about our hobbies,

but always school,

which he saw as *our* work.

I learned workaholism from my dad.

And early on in my ministry I neglected my family.

It was only when I wore myself down,

trying to be everywhere and do everything,

and STILL got complaints from someone

about what I had *not* done,

that I finally had to recalibrate my life.

I had to pull back,

spend some serious time with God,

and remember that he had *not* called me

to do everything and be everywhere.

Some people called me to that.

But not *God*.
 Being everywhere and in the middle of everything
 is God's job, and *I'm not God*.
 That's part of the importance of the Sabbath.
 The second time Moses listed off the Ten Commandments,
 found in Deuteronomy 5,
 the reason given for the Sabbath rest is,
 "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt
 and that the LORD your God brought you out of there
 with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.
 Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to
 observe the Sabbath day." (Dt.5:15)
 You were slaves once,
 but God set you free.
 Don't be a slave to your work.
 Stop thinking you have nothing to do in life but work,
 and that the world will stop turning on its axis
 if you do not work.
 That's God's job, and you're not God.
 And to insure you remember that,
 take off a day each week,
 and see the world keeps spinning
 without you.

All work and no play does make Jack a dull boy.
 Ironically, my dad's name was Jack.
 And it's my first name.
 Later on, some writers added to that old saying,
 "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,
 All *play* and no *work* makes Jack a mere *toy*."
 as a plea for healthy balance.

But there's another aspect of the story of the Ants and the Grasshopper that is troubling.

What about compassion?

The Ants told the Grasshopper,
 "Oh, you're hungry?
 You were making music while we were working.
 Go dance!"

Is that what Jesus would do?

When Jesus was on the hillside with the crowd of 5000,
 and it was getting on toward mealtime,
 did he say,
 "You didn't think ahead to bring food.
 Too bad, so sad."

He had compassion on them, and he fed them. (Mt.15:32)

How many times do we see in the Gospels that Jesus "had compassion"?
 So he healed their sick.
 Jesus had compassion, so he cast out demons.
 Jesus had compassion, so he met their needs.

But the Ants...

Compassion is non-negotiable if you are really trying to follow Jesus.

On the other hand...

If you keep giving to others, won't they just keep taking?
 Aren't they going to just become dependent on you?
 Won't they just decide working is not necessary?
 Some will do that.
 Some will not; they'll work when they can,
 because they've got some sense of self-respect

and they want to make a difference.

But some will do that.

Some, if they can get a handout, they'll take the day off.
 Studies have shown that when welfare programs offer more,
 it is harder to get some of the unemployed to take a job when they can.
 Again, not all, but some.

The church in Thessalonica ran across that.

There were some who expected Jesus to return any moment.

And if he's coming back soon,
 why work up a sweat with hard work?

If I take it easy,
 and Jesus takes his time,
 the church will take care of me.

They took advantage of the compassionate nature of the church.

So Paul wrote,

"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters,
 to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive
 and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example.

We were not idle when we were with you,
 nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it.

On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling
 so that we would not be a burden to any of you.

We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help,
 but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule:

'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.'

We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive.

They are not busy; they are busybodies.

Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ
 to settle down and earn the food they eat."

(2Th.3:6-12)

Notice he said, "The one who is UNWILILNG to work,"

or in some translations, "If they WILL not work."

Not "those who CANNOT work."

"Those who WILL not work."

The distinction is vitally important.

If someone has a disability that they can't work around,
 if the economy is such that there are no jobs available,
 if someone got hit with big medical bills that insurance won't cover,
 then lend a hand.

But if someone is able-bodied, of sound mind, and there are jobs to be had...

We might feel bad about saying, "No."

But someone choosing to not work is

not only missing out on their own paycheck.

They are missing out on the self-respect, the dignity,
 of doing work that adds value to this world.

They are missing out on the satisfaction of
 supporting themselves and their family.

And they are missing out on the opportunity to help others.

God created human beings in the beginning,
 and gave us work to do. (Ge.1:26, 28; 2:5)

That's part of what it means to be made
 in the image of God.

Those who will not work are
 missing out on a foundational part of
 their humanity.

Enabling the person who *will* not work to *continue* not working
 is not true compassion.
 It is about making me feel better.

But there *are* people who truly need help,
 who *cannot* help themselves,
 and there are ways you *can* help.
 Let me paint a picture.
 She came with one large and one small suitcase of clothing,
 one for herself and one for her young daughter.
 She had a few dollars in her purse,
 but nothing else.
 She had made some bad decisions and needed to escape a bad situation,
 a man who had totally controlled her life,
 emotionally abused her,
 physically intimidated her,
 verbally threatened her,
 and endangered her child.
 She had survived under his thumb for a period of time.
 But when he insisted she prostitute herself and hand over the money to him....
 That was the end.
 Hiding from him while living on the streets,
 she heard talk of a ministry, a little community tucked out of sight,
 where she could recover and rebuild their life.
 By asking a few questions, she managed to find them.
 It was so wonderful,
 she breathed a huge sigh of relief.
 From the beginning they made clear this would be a safe place for her and her daughter.
 They would have a home, food, and safety,
 while living in community with other women and their children
 escaping dangerous situations.
 BUT... she was expected to commit to *working* to build a new life.
 This is not a free ride with no responsibility.
 Put in your time doing chores in this community:
 cooking, doing dishes, picking up trash,
 dusting, sweeping and vacuuming, all those sorts of things.
 After an initial period of time to get settled in
 and her feet on the ground,
 get a job to make a little money.
 Make use of counseling,
 so she did not again put herself into such a relationship.
 Get instruction about how to parent your child
 so they do not become vulnerable in the future.
 Pursue your education,
 starting at whatever level was necessary,
 so you have the tools and credentials to get a good job.
 With each new step she took,
 the community celebrated,
 and she felt so good, so proud.
 And the look in the eyes of her little girl...
 That made it all worth the effort.
 And when she landed an office job in a regional corporation,
 with a good, livable income,
 and she and her daughter were able to get an apartment of their own...
 Wow.
 It was so much better.
 Because this part of the image of God in her was being fulfilled.

If you'd like to offer help like that,
 that is the work of Magdalena House.
 We have a volunteer crew go out every month to
 work on the grounds, mow the yard,
 do repairs on the fence and homes,
 built IKEA furniture, put up Christmas lights, and whatever else is needed.
 You could be a part of that ministry.

There are opportunities to serve those in need right here in the family of Northwest Hills.
 We don't have unlimited resources to do anything and everything.
 But we do have a fund that is carefully managed,
 used to help people experiencing one-time emergencies.
 Surprise medical bills not covered by insurance,
 help replacing a roof,
 school supplies for children,
 or any number of other needs.

You could offer yourself as a driver for those who cannot drive,
 to give them a ride to Sunday worship and Sunday school,
 to take them to a doctor's appointment,
 to run an errand.

There are always ways you can offer help to those who need it,
 and show a little of Jesus' compassion.

Let's reimagine the story of the Ants and the Grasshopper.

One bright day in the late autumn a family of Ants were bustling about in the warm sunshine,
 drying out the grain they had stored up during the summer,
 when a starving Grasshopper,
 his fiddle under his arm,
 came up and humbly begged for a bite to eat.

"What?" cried the Ants in surprise.

"Haven't you stored *anything* away for the winter?"

What in the world were you doing all last summer?"

"I didn't have time to store up any food," whined the Grasshopper.

"I was so busy making music that, before I knew it, the summer was gone."

The Ants considered his situation,
 talked among themselves,
 and offered to the Grasshopper,

"We have some extra food, so you can eat with us.

But we want you to live in our midst, and learn our ways,
 where we do not just play, but also work hard,
 so you don't end up in this situation again.

And, from time to time you can play your fiddle for us.

We could use a little music around here."

And so the Grasshopper did just that.