

The Unfairness of the Gospel: Why Not Equal Pay?

A sermon preached by

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Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When 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.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

That’s not fair! As the younger child in my family, I heard that line quite frequently from my older brother. Somehow as a 10- or 12-year-old, he hadn’t gotten the memo about how parents change their parenting styles or their expectations as they move through the birth order in their families. So, my life was a little easier than his and it wasn’t fair, something I was happy to remind him of, from time to time.

If there is a story in the New Testament that underscores the unfairness of the gospel truth, this is it. Workers go out in to the fields at the landowner’s invitation, some at the beginning of the day, some at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., or 5 p.m., and all of them are given the same wage. That’s not fair, shout the early workers. And indeed on one level, they are right.

This is the stuff that leads to unionization or work stoppages. HR department heads across the country are shaking their heads and offering corrective advice to the landowner. In

another era, the workers would be carrying picket signs and chanting about equal pay for equal work.

Now this parable is not a blueprint for labor practices or economic systems any more than the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a class on parenting. We all know that any company that paid people who work one hour a day the same as it paid full-time workers would soon have a hard time finding employees willing to show up first thing in the morning. Even so, this parable works on our imaginations in ways that have profound implications for the marketplace and economic justice. It allows us to enter, for a moment, into an alternate world, one that operates on generosity rather than greed, ambition, and competition. It allows us to experience a world in which those who stand ignored, idle, and discarded by society are nevertheless of great value to God – worthy, regardless of their circumstances, to live with dignity each day. And it discloses the generosity that flows from the very person of God. After letting our imaginations dwell in the surprising generosity of this parable, we can no longer look at that parking lot filled with farmworkers who are paid unjustly and who are viewed as disposable, and rest easy.

When I was a young child, my family lived in central Michigan in an area that was a rich and productive farming region. Mostly it was corn, wheat, and soybeans that were grown there, but some farmers in the area also grew cucumbers, and migrant workers would come during the mid- to-late summer to pick them by hand from the fields. They lived in desperate conditions. The farms had small groups of wood frame shacks, no indoor plumbing, electricity, or running water. Along with others from our church, I visited these camps as a five- or six-year-old, in an attempt to provide comfort and support. I saw children my age working in the fields and I came away with the same language of my brother, “That’s not fair.”

Just a couple years later, CBS broadcast “Harvest of Shame,” an Edward R. Murrow documentary that chronicled the plight of migrant farmworkers. Murrow closed the program with this commentary: “The migrants have no lobby. Only an enlightened, aroused and perhaps angered public opinion can do anything about the migrants. The people you have seen have the strength to harvest your fruit and vegetables. They do not have the strength to influence legislation.” Sadly, the changes that have come since then are only incremental.

Fairness is of course in the eye of the beholder. We could also say it isn’t fair that some of these workers crossed the U.S. border illegally. We could say it isn’t fair that their children might be punished for the actions of their parents. We could say it isn’t fair that they contribute

to medicare and social security but will never be able to use it. We could say it isn't fair that they aren't likely to afford the very food that they harvest.

Perhaps in the end, the real message of Jesus' parable, at least for those in worship here today, is that like the diligent all-day workers, many of us are blind to the privileges that we enjoy, privileges of race, gender, economic status, or country of origin. We do not live in an opportunity-neutral world. These privileges give many of us a head start that is often insurmountable to those whose parents are standing in the town square waiting for work. And instead of acknowledging these privileges we become angry when someone else is given a daily wage, their daily bread.

One author has written that "the parable depicts a limited and false, form of justice. We can tell it is false justice because it produces envy and division, rather than wholeness and healed relationships. Jesus' disciples have and will soon again demonstrate their interest in securing places of status and prestige in the kingdom. They, too, like the workers in the vineyard, will splinter and become alienated. The parable is meant for them. It is a harsh reminder that there is no justice, no kingdom of heaven, if we end up alone in the world."¹

Karoline Lewis wrote this week that "The subversive and easily overlooked purpose of this parable is to make us realize how deep our sense of entitlement exists. How our sense of privilege is operative in how we envision what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like. How we have convinced ourselves that all, in equal measure, have indeed experienced the love, grace, opportunity, and encouragement in their lives when in fact that is so very far from the truth.

"The deep-seated, systemic, institutional reality of privilege, especially white-privilege, and more especially white-male-privilege continues to wreak havoc upon the basic principles of freedom and justice for all. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard does exactly what Jesus' parables are meant to do."² To challenge, disrupt, and point us toward the reality that what passes for fairness, in our view of the world, is actually patently unfair and unjust. If you think this sense of privilege is only racial, consider the generational unfairness of a social security system that funds retirement for my generation but isn't currently sustainable for 20-, 30- or 40-year-olds. You see, it is all around us.

¹ Stanley Saunders, www.workingpreacher.org September 24, 2017

² Karoline Lewis, www.workingpreacher.org September 20, 2017

Unfortunately, we live in a world where the belief, “I got mine, you go fish” is the principal narrative. So much so that when folks get more than *we* think they deserve, *we* get angry, like the workers in the fields.

But perhaps the message of the parable for us today is not an accounting exercise. Maybe, instead, Jesus tells it to encourage our own generosity, acceptance, and gratitude for what we have and what we have been given. And perhaps that helps us to work for that reality for others. This way we can celebrate whenever there is food on the table, not just ours, and whenever there is opportunity for all. In this way fairness is much more broadly defined and justice is a vision of God’s hope that all might have their daily wage, their daily bread. It isn’t easy. The temptations of comparison are with us every hour, but this is what we are called to do and be.

Amen