



“The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard”
Scripture – Matthew 20:1-16
Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 17, 2024

A university professor recalls the time he served on a faculty committee that was reviewing an incoming professor. As part of the process, he had the opportunity to see the salary being offered to the new professor, and when he saw it, his teeth clinched. It was double his own salary! The moment he glimpsed the pay, his theology beckoned him: “Grace. Charity. Rejoice for the good fortune of the other.” But his stomach was screaming, “What the heck is this?”¹

His gut reaction was: “This is not fair! I’ve been working here for years and proven myself to be hard-working and trustworthy. This bonus baby has practically no track record. What gives?”

Most have a similar reaction to this morning’s passage. It is undoubtedly one of Jesus’ most UNpopular parables. The story runs counter to our basic sense of fairness.

As Meredith read it, you may have conjured up the scene in your mind. A landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Even today, most towns have a well-known street corner where people looking for work gather. Usually out-of-work men show up at the corner and stand around hoping someone will swing by in a pick-up truck and offer them a job.

In Jesus’ parable, the owner of a vineyard went to the familiar corner in his village and found several people hungry for work. He announced that he will hire all of them and agreed to pay each one a denarius. The workers were thrilled. There were fist-bumps all around. They said, “Yes! We have a job! And the landowner didn’t try to short change us. We will receive a full day’s wage. Let’s go!”

A few hours later, the vineyard owner headed back to the “Need-a-job” spot and discovered several more people hoping to be hired. He told them to head over to his vineyard and at the end of the day he would pay them what is right.

He swung back by the familiar spot at noon and again at three, hiring every individual looking for work. Then, late in the day, a mere hour before quitting time, the vineyard owner employed one last batch of workers. They headed into the vineyard and did what they could in the final 60 minutes.

Once the day's work was complete, the owner instructed his foreman to pay all of the workers, but to start with those who were hired last. The one-hour workers shuffled up to the pay table and were stunned when they received their wage. Despite only working one hour, they received a denarius, a full day's pay. They could not believe their good fortune.

Imagine the hopes that began to surge through the minds of those who worked a full 12 hours. They probably thought to themselves: "If the one-hour workers collected a full day's wage, we might get two weeks' worth of pay!" Like thoroughbreds eager to bolt from the starting gate, they were keen to step up to the table.

Yet when their turn came, their dreams were not realized. The foreman paid them the same as everyone else – one day's wage. What sounded terrific to them 12 hours earlier, now felt like a pittance. They protested, "What's going on here? We slaved all day under a scorching sun and you pay us the same as these last workers who only put in one hour?"

The owner stepped forward and said, "I haven't been unfair. We agreed that you would work for the usual daily wage, right? Why do you care what I pay the others?"

But we do care, don't we? If others work fewer hours, but receive the same pay it grates against our notion of fairness. Why should someone who puts in 1/12th of the effort receive the same amount? So, rather than feeling good about receiving the amount they agreed to at the start of the day, the all-day workers now feel like victims of injustice.

I Googled "symbol of justice" and the first entry was "Lady Justice." Many courthouses across the land have a depiction, if not a full statue of her. You know this icon. She wears a blindfold and she holds scales that are perfectly balanced on truth and fairness. She is our ideal of justice. Blind objectivity. No special favors for the well-heeled or the well-connected. Of course, that's not our current reality, but we yearn for the ideal of everyone being treated the same.

A word of caution. This parable is not a teaching on employer-employee labor practices. Tom Long writes: "If anyone should take this parable seriously as a prescription for the structure of an economy or a labor market, it would blow all economic systems out of the water. Capitalism would collapse, as would Marxism, socialism, agrarianism, feudalism, barter economy and all other known economic schemes...Any employers who actually behaved like the landowner in this parable...would soon find themselves short of labor. Who would put in a full day's work when one gets paid the same whether one grinds away all day under the broiling sun or shows up an hour before quitting time?"²

If this parable is not about a revolutionary way of doing business, then what is Jesus' point? He's talking about the character of God, whom the landowner represents. It helps to keep in mind that "The parable is not driven by the landowner's need for workers, *but by the laborers' need for work*....The landowner sees people not working and puts them to work...The NRSV translation is a bit misleading when it says that the workers were 'standing idle.' The Greek literally means 'without work. They are not goof-offs; they are simply those who had not work, no way to earn their daily bread.'"³

So were the workers who toiled all day treated unfairly? Isn't it true, that if the all-day workers had never learned what the one-hour workers were paid, they would have gone home satisfied? They received a full day's wage for a full day's work. It was only when they knew that others were the recipients of extraordinary generosity that their mood soured.

We humans are a competitive lot, aren't we? We want to know where we stand in relation to others. Our emotions often swing – not on how we are actually doing – but on how we're doing in comparison to others.

Most of us have much, much more than the basic necessities of life. If you go on a mission trip to a developing country, it's shocking to see how little some people have in comparison to what we possess. If you come home after being with people who have only one change of clothes and you open your closet and your drawers to see all of your stuff, you get a sense of your abundance.

But most of us do not compare ourselves to those who have so much less than we do. We envy those who have more. Envy causes us untold misery. *Is it possible to shift our focus?*

Going back to our parable, what if instead of zeroing in on the workers, we aim our eyes on the owner of the vineyard? Although the all-day workers seem temporarily blinded, the vineyard owner was not acting unfairly. He was acting generously. He did not pay all of the workers simply what they earned, because he wanted them to have what they needed. Each one of those unemployed workers needed a full day's wage to put food on the table. The owner was not thinking solely about the work they accomplished for him; he was thinking about what a difference he could make in their lives if he was generous.

Professor and author Kate Bowler tells about her parents' unique tradition. "Each year on their anniversary they go out to dinner to celebrate. But it isn't just dinner they look forward to. They begin to scope the room, reading the body language of their fellow diners. Once they pick their target, they conspire with the waiter. They say, 'See that irritable couple over there, the ones not talking to each other at all? We want to pay for their meal, and be out of the restaurant before they ask for their bill. This is to be totally anonymous.'"

"Usually, the waiter joins them in their sly glances and big grins and promises to let them know what the couple orders. The waiter inevitably asks, 'Do you do this often?' Her parents smile and say, 'It's our tradition.'"

"There is something about this type of generosity that reverberates. Not only is it something her parents look forward to each year, the waiters get in on it, and, hopefully, the person on the receiving end bumps their toe on generosity for a change. It is a strange kind of magic. It is medicine for the soul to be generous. Even when it's done in secret. Even when no one says, thank you. Especially when it isn't expected."⁴

It is easy to get sucked into believing that this parable is about fairness, but it isn't. It is about the character of God. And we learn that God is not lady justice, because God is not limited by human ideas of what is fair and what is not fair. The all-day workers complained because they did not want the short-timers to earn the same amount as they did. Do you remember the response of the landowner? He said, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

You may remember another parable in which a father throws a huge celebration for his prodigal son, but the older brother grumbles that the father has gone overboard.

Similar to that parable, today's parable is about the goodness of God. God does not give to us according to what we earn, God's love is so rich and deep that God gives more than we could ever earn.

A colleague tells about the day she was standing in a hallway at Montreat Conference Center. Tears were running down the face of her friend. The friend was no stranger to tears: her struggles with infertility seemed to define her life. Months turned into years as she prayed and waited, as she endured agonizing medical procedures and yet: no child. But this time they were tears of joy. She had just received a phone call. She and her husband had just been chosen as adoptive parents for an infant no more than a few minutes old. Everything was happening so fast there was almost no further information available. Was their child a boy or a girl? She didn't know. Was the child black or white or brown? She didn't know. Would the child gravitate to music, or revel in math? She didn't know. Would the child quietly follow rules or look for every loophole? She didn't know. She didn't know any of that. All she knew was that she was going to be a mother. Her love for that child was a decision her heart made instantly, and there was nothing that child needed to do, nothing that child could do, to ever change that.⁵

God loves us like this young woman loves her adopted child. God desires the best for us and there is nothing we can do to change that.

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, "Investment Strategies for Unrighteous Mammon: Preaching about Money from the Gospel of Luke" at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, May 2009.
2. Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024), p. 175.
3. *Ibid.*, p.176.
4. Kate Bowler, *Good Enough*, (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), p. 141-142.
5. Jenny McDevitt, "Do I Really Have to Believe in Predestination?" January 17, 2021.

Prayers of the People ~ Randall T. Clayton

O God, your grace is like an ever-flowing stream, never slowing, never stopping, never in short supply. What is in short supply, though is peace... many among us struggle with family relationships that are in tatters, and others with real fears for our individual lives and our community, both for today and for tomorrow. And then, there's warfare in Ukraine, warfare in the Middle East, and in many other places on the face of the globe. So, we pray for peace...peace for our own troubled spirits, peace for troubled lives, and peace for the places across the world that live with aggressors, and where age old hurts are seeking to be solved with the weapons of war. Bring peace, O God, to us, and to our world.

As we in this church reach out toward tomorrow, we pray for your wisdom and guidance for our leaders, for the work of the 2030 team, and for the work of the session, the board of deacons, and the trustees as they seek to guide the mission and ministry of this congregation. As we think of tomorrow, we lift up especially this day the work of the stewardship and finance committees. We pray that the stewardship of our members will be motivated by generosity and become signs of your Spirit working in and through this church.

For those impacted by wind, or rain, or fire, we pray – lifting up especially those in Florida, South Carolina and North Carolina as they continue to live in the aftermath of natural disaster. Give hope to those who are struggling to find hope amid destruction.

For those across our world whose lives are less than they could be due to oppression or persecution or racism or any other structure, we pray. Show us how we might more effectively work for a world where all are valued.

Move us beyond jealousy, beyond resentment, beyond desires to get even, beyond the grudges we hold. Move us beyond that we might find the wholeness we desire and that those around us might also get to experience new signs of grace in their lives.

We ask for comfort for those who grieve, hope for those who are dispirited, and healing for those whose bodies are hurting.

We ask these things, trusting that your grace and your love are far greater even than we can imagine, and remembering the prayer that Jesus taught we pray this day, **“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”**