

9.4.16

A Story for Labor Day

Matthew 20:1-15

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**“For the kingdom of heaven is like** a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, *‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’* So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And 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?’* They said to him, *‘Because no one has hired us.’* He said to them, *‘You also go into the vineyard.’* When 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.’* When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual **daily wage**. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, *‘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.’*

But he replied to one of them, *‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? **Or are you envious because I am generous?**’*

A lot of us are offended by this story. It challenges our sense of justice. It’s not fair! Perhaps it seems like poor labor relations. Who would want to work for an owner who treats his employees so unfairly? Can you imagine laboring for 12 hours in the scorching heat while others work for just a few hours once it has cooled off - and they’re paid the same as us! To make matters worse, this parable isn’t about economics, but about the kingdom of heaven. If anybody

needs to be fair, right, and just it's God. If this is God's way of doing things it seems wrong.

Have you ever gone to the supermarket when only a few checkout lines were open? Have you ever been in a checkout line that you were sure would melt your ice cream before you got within sight of the cashier? The people in front of you all appear to be making their once a year trip to the grocery store to buy food. They have several loaded carts, coupled together like freight cars. Others who don't have tons of food have crying children. No line would be complete without the person who gets to the register and is shocked that the store isn't giving away the food for free and only then do they begin searching for their money or card. While you're waiting in this line, a miracle happens. A cashier walks into the next aisle and says, "*May I help someone?*" With the skill of a NASCAR driver you push your cart out of the traffic and roar into the open register, thanking God for answered prayer. *Unless* you happen to be the second person in the long line who believes she should go next because she has been waiting the longest. That is typical of us isn't it?

**If we're last we want undeserved generosity, if we're second, we want fairness.** Generally speaking, we want things to be fair especially if we think we have been slighted. We work hard (we think) and try to do the right thing yet we struggle while others we believe to be less honest and less faithful than ourselves seem to prosper. Ultimately, since life isn't fair, we want God to be fair and to straighten out all the injustices we witness, if not here, then in heaven. Jesus can't be saying God is like this landowner, who intentionally offends the early workers by making them wait in line to see the last workers receive the same pay for 1 hour of work as they get for 12. Or can he?

Let's start with the fact that the first workers got exactly what they agreed to work for (the usual daily wage), but they still get mad and grumble. A wise man once said, "*If only we wanted to be happy it would be easy; but we want to be happier than other people, which is almost always difficult, since we think them happier than they are.*" When others work less and get the same reward we feel sorry for ourselves and complain that life isn't fair. Most of us, including

myself, believe that material rewards should be scaled to effort and results. Often our identity is wrapped up in rewards we can compare - like grades, salaries, houses, cars, degrees, or titles. **We may find ourselves measuring the fairness of God by comparing what we receive with what our neighbors get, instead of by whether God keeps his word to us.** The landowner kept his word to the early workers he didn't cheat or deceive them, but they're mad.

**We usually demand fairness because we think we deserve more.** I never heard of anyone demanding fairness that didn't think if he got it, he'd *gain*. We rarely consider the possibility that if God was fair with everyone in the world we might have considerably *less* than we do. More often we assume that if God is good, God will be fair, and if God is fair, then we'll come out ahead because we deserve more. That's why so many of us relate to the 6:00 and 9:00 a.m. workers. We assume we're most like those who have worked the hardest and the longest and deserve more for our efforts. Fewer of us probably identified ourselves with the five o'clock workers who benefited from an act of generosity and grace. However we may need to consider the possibility we've deceived ourselves about our own goodness and what we deserve.

The Barna research group did a study on religion in America and they found people believed that Christians were the same as other people with the exception of two things - Christians go to church and they're more judgmental. Our first response is, *"They're wrong! I am not!"*

Our tendency to judge others is often revealed in our perception of the 5:00 o'clock workers. Some people may believe the 5 p.m. workers are lazy, don't want to work, and just want to milk the system. But Jesus is clear in the story- the workers have been standing idle all day, not because they didn't want to work, but because no one has hired them. There are no jobs. Some of you know what it is like to want to work but to get laid off or to be unable to find a job.

Imagine you are one of those 5 p.m. workers standing in the market place at 4:30 p.m. What have you been thinking and feeling? Have you spent the day anxiously worrying about the job you need to get? How do you feel about yourself? How are you going to pay the bills? If you're married, what will your

spouse say when you come home without any money or food? Then this landowner gives you one hour of work. At 6 o'clock, it's pay time. You expect fairness and a pittance for pay. Are you shocked by the landowner's generosity? How do you feel about the landowner's generosity toward you? How do you feel about yourself? **If we've been blessed by generosity that ignored merit or achievement, we know what it is like to be touched by amazing grace.**

Most commentaries or study Bibles call this the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, but it isn't ultimately about the workers, it is about the landowner. It's more theologically correct to call it **The Parable of the Generous Landowner**. Consider the landowner for a moment. He's actively involved in his vineyard. He could sleep late, but he's not. He's in the marketplace, hiring workers at 6 o'clock in the morning. The vineyard owner provides a place for service, money for daily bread, protection from harm, and he actively seeks out laborers. He's compassionate; he feels for the folks who can't get a job and who'll be faced with going home at the end of the day with no money to buy food and no satisfaction of a job well done. **The landowner is doing all he can to empty the marketplace and fill the vineyard.**

When evening comes, the landowner claims the right to pay the workers not on the basis of their merits but on the basis of his own generosity. When the early workers grumble against him and give him the evil eye (the Greek of verse 15 reads *"is your eye evil because I am good?"*), the landowner rightly asks why his generosity should be condemned as injustice. The landowner cheated no one and everyone received at least as much as was promised or could be fairly expected or more. **Jesus reveled in the mercy and compassion of God. Those who worship God are to imitate the Lord's generosity, not begrudge it.** Can we learn to see other people not as competitors for limited rewards but as companions in the vineyard? The early workers could have thanked the landowner for hiring more workers throughout the day which certainly would have alleviated some of the pressure on them to harvest the crop while it was ripe.

Imagine living our lives in such a way that instead of grumbling against God and our neighbors we could rejoice at our neighbor's good fortune and

thank God for providing for their needs as well as our own. The parable invites us to consider the question, *“Which is real, the grasping competitive world in which we live everyday, or the world of generosity created by the parable”*<sup>1</sup>

Matthew places this parable in the context of a discussion between Jesus and the disciples about rewards and grace. Like some of us, the apostles want to know what their reward will be for the things they’ve sacrificed to follow Jesus. Jesus is reminding us that God will honor any sacrifices by his followers, but the reward will so far surpass our sacrifice that it must be seen as an outright gift.

One of the memorable experiences I had as a pastor took place in 1999 when retired ABC pastor and BBC member Bishop Covell and I had the privilege of going to visit a woman at Eagle Pond nursing home who wished to be baptized by immersion by a Baptist pastor before she died. We were told time was of the essence. We spoke with her and explained that immersion was not necessary for salvation that it is the intention of our heart and not the mode of baptism that is of ultimate importance. I read to her Paul’s words about baptism from Roman’s 6 and then Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross who was welcomed into paradise without being baptized at all. Bishop then took water and asked her if she believed in Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior and she replied that she did and Bishop baptized her with a little water. She visibly relaxed and looked at peace. Before we left, her son and the nursing home person thanked us so much for coming. She died half an hour after we left, welcomed joyfully into God’s vineyard

At times, we may feel that our long and costly service qualifies us for a higher rate of pay in God’s heavenly vineyard, but we’re to remember that none of us deserves the glorious future God has prepared for us. Rather we are to imitate the generous spirit of God. Listen to another parable, this one by Anthony De Mello. “The kingdom of God is like two brothers who were called by God to give up all they had and serve humanity. The older responded to the call generously; though he had to wrench his heart from his family and the girl he loved and dreamed of marrying. He eventually went off to a distant land where

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, *Preaching & The Literary Forms of the Bible*, page 101.

he spent himself in the service of the poorest of the poor. A persecution arose in that country and he was arrested, falsely accused, tortured and put to death.

And the Lord said to him, *“Well done good and faithful servant! You gave me a thousand talents worth of service. I shall now give you a billion, billion talents’ worth of reward. Enter into the joy of your Lord!”*

The younger boy’s response was less than generous. He decided to ignore it and to go ahead and marry the girl he loved. He enjoyed a happy married life, his business prospered, and he became rich and famous. Occasionally he would give alms to the poor.

And when it was his turn to die, the Lord said to him, *“Well done good and faithful servant! You have given me ten talents’ worth of service. I shall now give you a billion, billion talents’ worth of reward. Enter into the joy of your Lord!”*

The older brother was surprised when he heard that his brother was to get the same reward as he. **And he was pleased.** He said, ***‘Lord, knowing this as I do, if I were to be born and live my life again, I would still do exactly what I did for you.’***<sup>2</sup>

Each of us chooses whether we will be grumblers like the early workers, or generous souls like the owner of the vineyard.

Let’s not be envious because God is generous.

Let’s celebrate the generosity of God, who rewards us, and our neighbors, far beyond what we deserve.

The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon said, ***“It is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness.”***

Deuteronomy 24:14-15, *“You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. 15 You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.”*

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. What is/was your initial, gut level reaction to the story Jesus tells in Matthew 20:1-15? Why do you think feel/responded that way?
2. Who do you most identify with in the story – an early worker, a midday worker, one of those last hired, or the owner of the vineyard? Why do you connect with that character?
3. Would you want to work for someone who treats employees like the owner does in the story? Why or why not?
4. What does Jesus' story teach us about fairness and generosity?
5. Jesus begins by saying, "*For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*" What do we learn about the kingdom of heaven through this story?

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony De Mello, "Good News" from, *Song of the Bird*, pages 117-118.