

The Wages of Grace Matthew 20:1-16

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 20th September 2020

After hearing this parable—The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard—we probably want to shout, “But that’s not fair!” We may even feel angry at the landowner for being unjust. There’s much about this parable that doesn’t sit well with us. The Reign of God, Jesus tells us, is like a landowner who hires laborers throughout the day to work in his vineyard. Some worked from early morning. Others worked half a day. And others worked only an hour. But they were all paid the same amount, the usual daily wage. The laborers who toiled hard throughout day begin to grumble when they see that the ones who worked for only an hour receive the same wage promised for a full day’s work. That doesn’t seem fair.

Where does this sense of fairness, this deep almost instinctual desire to be treated equally, come from? Is it something we first experience as children in the playground or at school, after being treated unfairly? Is it cultural? Are we hardwired this way?

Several years ago, two zoologists at Emory University, Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal, were curious about the evolution of fairness and where our distaste for unfairness comes from. They designed an experiment with two Capuchin monkeys, in two cages side-by-side, in view of the other. The cages contained tiny rocks. Every time a monkey gave a rock to their human handler, she would get a slice of cucumber. Capuchins love cucumbers, so they were eager to hand over their rocks. After several equal exchanges, the handler gave one of the monkeys a grape instead of a cucumber—and monkeys really love grapes, even more than cucumbers. Quick to notice that grapes were now the prize for good performance, the monkey quickly handed over another rock, expecting to receive a grape. But no, he received another piece of cucumber. In fact, the handler gave the second monkey another grape—for free! And then the first monkey becomes enraged. She throws the cucumber back at the handler. She throws herself against the walls, she thrusts an arm out of the cage and bangs on the shelf in frustration, demanding a grape. You can watch it yourself on [YouTube](#).¹

Are we wired for fairness? And what’s the relationship between our experience of unfairness and jealousy and even envy? It’s complicated. What, then, do we do with a text, with this parable, this parable of the kingdom, a parable given to help us see and discern what the Reign, the Kingdom of God looks like and feels like? It doesn’t look like a fair or just place to live.

The workers in the vineyard are like the monkey grumbling when she sees grapes being doled out instead of cucumbers for the exact same task—what do you mean she’s getting grapes for free, for doing nothing? It’s not fair.

It’s doesn’t appear fair in a society like ours, built upon merit, “an honest day’s pay for an honest day’s work,” where we expect to be rewarded accordingly for our labor, for our performance, for our achievements, our climb up the corporate ladder. These are the rules in our meritocracy, with an economy in which no one gets anything for free. You have to earn it. The

apostle Paul said, “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work” (2 Thess. 3:10). Captain John Smith (1580-1631) said something similar to the residents of Jamestown. Even Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) said, “He who shall not work shall not eat.”² These are the rules. Ingrained in us. And so we get angry when some don’t play by the rules, or we get jealous when someone receives more than they deserve, more than we think they deserve. We hear talk about the “undeserving poor.” They’re “lazy.” The poor are just lazy, unwilling to work, that’s why they’re poor. There’s no such thing as a free lunch. Then we get angry when someone does receive something for free, without working for it, and we say, why that’s socialism. No, that’s not how we play this game.

But what if the rules of the game aren’t fair for everyone? What if the game is fixed and the system is against you? What if you’re willing to work, waiting to work, but you can’t find a job? The world of peasant farming that Jesus described in this parable is similar to day laborers or gig workers in our day. In first-century Palestine, workers were hired by the day in a system of widespread impoverishment. There was not enough work for everyone to do, which meant there was not enough resources available to provide for families. The people were underemployed and therefore extremely vulnerable to the heavy taxation and political oppression of the Roman Empire.

Hispanic theologian Pablo Jimenéz reminds us that the reality of the Hispanic community in the United States has many points of contact with the reality of first-century Jews. If you look closely at major intersections, say, along Route 40, places in Baltimore County and Howard County you will see the *desempleados*, the unemployed, waiting to be hired for the day. We have *braceros* on the Eastern Shore, migrant agricultural workers hired for the day. Or *niñeras* or *sirvientas* who provide childcare and housekeeping for the affluent. Or *costureros* who sit behind a sewing machine at home or in factories and sew all day. *Obreros* provide cheap labor for the day on construction sites or for landscapers, mulching your garden or cutting your lawn.³ You can see *obrero*s waiting to be hired throughout the day near Home Depot or Lowe’s. They are not idle, but they’re waiting to work. And they’re equally vulnerable as first-century day laborers.

In the parable, the landowner is not your usual landowner. There’s work to be done in his vineyard—there are grapes to be harvested and pressed into wine to be sold, there is money to be made. At the crack of dawn, he hires a work crew and they agree on the terms, the usual daily wage. Around 9 a.m. the landowner goes back to the marketplace and sees others standing “idle,” but this should really be translated “unemployed.” They aren’t lazy. They aren’t loafing about. They agree on the terms and they’re sent to work. He returns at noon and then again at three o’clock and does the same. He invites them to work and sends them out to the vineyard. He returns again to the marketplace at 5 p.m., and he finds others also unemployed. Now several biblical commentators over the years have said the laborers who were there at 5 p.m. were just lazy or they were loafing about all day (which the text doesn’t say).⁴ They should have been out there earlier in the day. But what they fail to remember is that these workers could have been on other jobs earlier in the day, requiring several hours of labor. Now they’re back, “unemployed,” waiting to fit in one more job in the day. Not unlike what happens all day around Home Depot or Lowe’s. The landowner asks, “Why are you standing here unemployed all day?” And what do they say? “Because no one had need of us” (Mt. 20:7). *Because no one had need of us.*

In other words, there's not enough work. The landowner doesn't even talk with them about the terms, he just sends them out to work.

And then we begin to realize that the landowner is not really interested in profit. He's concerned about people, about their needs, people having enough to survive. And when he blows the whistle at the end of the workday, at 6 p.m., we soon discover that he's not your usual landowner. He calls all the laborers together and directs the manager to dole out their wages starting with the ones hired last. Why does he do this? Because the landowner wants all of them to watch what he's about to do.

He first calls all the laborers hired at 5 p.m. and gives them an entire day's salary. When the first to be hired receives his wage, now expecting the landowner to be super generous, and discovers that he received nothing more than what was agreed to, he begins to grumble and complain. "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" (Mt. 20:12). "Friend," the landowner says—he's not being nice here, it's more like—"Listen buddy, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual day 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?" (Mt. 20:13-16)—and with *this* we come to heart of the parable, this gut-punching resolution of this crisis over workers' rights and fairness, which completely upends the meritocracy system and exposes the injustice built into *every* economic system. Pay *can* be based on something other than work. Pay can be based upon *need*, whether or not one can work for it—as impractical as this sounds. The rules of any economy cannot matter more than the needs of the people.

Yes, this is not your ordinary landowner. Jesus gives us this parable, as Thomas Long writes, in order for us to become, "monumentally impractical, to fracture so thoroughly our expectations, our customary patterns of practicality, that we are forced to think new thoughts—about ourselves, about other people, about God."⁵ Pay attention to the unfairness of the landowner and the way he doles out their pay, with no rhyme or reason—at least none the workers are familiar with—because that's the way God dispenses grace to all of us toiling in the vineyard of God's Realm, based not on how hard we've worked or how faithful we try to be, but based upon what is most *needed*. In God's Realm the grace extended to us is always more than we deserve. The parable is not really about the workers, though, it's about *God*—for, here we're given an image of who God is and how God moves in the world and in our lives, with a higher or super-justice that is above fairness (as we define it), who is more concerned about the welfare of the people, with what is right and good. "I desire mercy," Jesus said, "not sacrifice" (Mt. 9:13).

"Are you envious because I am generous?" The literal Greek here reads, "Is your eye so evil because I am good?" That's what the parable is getting at, what it's trying to provoke, what's trying to do in us: expose the evil eye in us, the evil eye that cannot see how grace works, an eye full of jealousy and envy, that has difficulty perceiving the generosity of God and living generous lives. "Evil eye" language takes us back earlier in Matthew, to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus spoke of the eye as a symbol of the whole person (Mt. 6:23). The landowner says to us, "Does my generosity expose the poverty of your own spirit?"⁶

Far too often we're like the workers who complain that God isn't being fair, not playing by the rules—by *our* rules of fairness. It's like the monkey who lashes out at the human handler who chooses to set aside the rules and extend grapes instead of cucumbers. The metaphor is not perfect. All metaphors break down. God does not switch the rules to trick us. The point is this: God is always playing by a different set of rules. Rules governed by grace—in God's economy of grace. And when we play by these “unfair” rules, we become gracious too.

¹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meiU6TxysCg>. I'm grateful to Debie Thomas' essay “On Fairness,” for the telling of this story. *Journey with Jesus* (13 September 2020) <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2757>

² Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (1917).

³ Pablo Jimenéz, “The Laborers of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16): A Hispanic Homiletical Reading,” *Journal for Preachers*, January 7, 1997.

⁴ For example, see: Joachim Jeremías, *The Parables of Jesus* (London SCM Press, 1954), 26, and Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 392.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 224.

⁶ This is Long's translation of the landowner's question, 227.