

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
September 24, 2023
Matthew 20:1–16

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

We are hungry, Lord, for truth, for justice, for love. Nourish us this day with better food than we could ever purchase, engineer or manufacture, your Word, your love, your Spirit, your daily bread for our life’s journey, in the company of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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 the 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?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Whenever we get to a parable like this one, to a story told by Jesus to make a point, many of us want to turn it into an allegory, a story with a hidden meaning or with a moral for us to learn, where characters are meant to stand in for something else, or to symbolize someone or something.

In this story that Jesus tells, where there are day-laborers who work various amounts of time but are all given the same amount of pay by the vineyard owner, there is a long history of interpretation that this whole story is about eternal salvation. The vineyard owner is God, the workers are Christians, and the daily wage is salvation. The workers who work the whole day, who are hired early on are lifelong Christians, and the workers who are hired toward the end of the day are people who are more like deathbed converts. It's not fair, but everyone gets the same salvation from God no matter what.

Still another reading imagines those that are hired first as the Jews, the original chosen ones of God, and the workers hired later as Gentiles, Christians. This can be and has been problematic, adding to the history

of anti-Semitism in the church. For many years, centuries even, Christianity often defined itself over-against Judaism so that those that grumble at the end of the day are the Jews where they look ungrateful against the laborers that come later. Amy Jill Levine, a New Testament and Jewish Studies scholar and professor, has said, this approach is an easy way to preach this story, but “If Judaism becomes the negative foil, then the message to the person in the pew is not ‘Be challenged to be better,’ but, ‘Oh, thank God we’re not like those Jews.’” But if we pay careful attention to the story – we note that the people are all from the same village – there is nothing to suggest we are talking about Jews versus Gentiles.¹

Even if the interpretation doesn’t equate the laborers hired earlier with the Jews, and we go back to the idea of long-term Christians versus deathbed converts, it still centers the story on the need to work for salvation. It turns the story away from the generosity of the vineyard owner to how much one worked to attain what is right.

Levine suggests, as she does with most parables, that how we title a parable does a lot to determine how we read it and where it puts our focus. Think about one of the most famous parables that Jesus tells that is most commonly called “The Prodigal Son.” But sometimes it can also be known as “The story of two sons,” or “The story of the generous father.” How we name things, how we title stories, can sway how we read them.

This story is often called “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” but Levin suggests it could be called “The Parable of the Generous Landowner” or “The Parable of Full Employment Where Everybody Gets a Living Wage.”

Maybe the story is about salvation. Jesus starts by saying, “the kingdom of heaven is like...” If we center the story with the generosity of the vineyard owner, then it becomes about God’s generosity toward all God’s children – no matter what. It takes the idea of salvation away from working toward it to earn it (which has nothing whatsoever to do with reformed theology and how we believe God works – we are saved by faith alone not our works) and moves it to the example of God’s amazing generosity and grace, that nothing can be earned, nothing needs to be earned, for us to receive God’s generosity.

But maybe this story is not meant so much as an allegory, maybe this story really is about economics, about the labor market and what is right and just. And if that is the case, there are some aspects of this parable that are unsettling.

First, one of the things I find troubling, is that the vineyard owner, although they are generous, they also set up the possibility for discord. By paying those that were hired last, first, the vineyard owner then sets up the rest of the laborers for bad feelings because they will, naturally, expect more. The vineyard owner then gets upset with the laborers when they complain – why not pay them all as they were hired – then they would all go away happy. Not knowing what the others were paid. All’s well that ends well. Instead, the workers are angry with the vineyard owner and jealous of each other.

Additionally, if the story centers on the generosity of the vineyard owner, the story still leaves us with vulnerable day laborers, who will need to rise the next day, not knowing where their daily wage will come from, or if they will be hired. It’s no way to live.

I think this story may actually have more to do with economics, with describing the kingdom of heaven where people get what is fair and just. Setting aside for a moment the problem that the story doesn’t eliminate

day laborers, taken more simply, it does show workers with enough, no matter how long they worked. It demonstrates a landowner who paid more than the fair share to workers. Who hired people, when it didn't make sense to hire them. Nowhere does it say that more people needed to be hired – just that the vineyard owner went back to where the people were waiting for work and hired them.

And, as another note, it says nothing about why those hired later were still there to be hired. Some interpretations have talked about those hired later as being too lazy to get up in the morning so that they were not initially there to begin with. And while the story mentions the workers as idle, the word used does not mean lazy, it just means they are not working at the moment. The day laborers hired later in the day were not late because they were lazy, they could have been there all morning and simply not hired until later, or they may have had other obligations to attend to first. How many stories have we heard about hourly workers having to make the choice to miss work and not get paid to go to the doctor or stay home with a sick child. Not everything can be explained by an “early bird gets the worm” kind of attitude.

Although it seems we may be hearing this less, it is still not uncommon for us to hear narratives that dismiss the working poor, or the underhoused or unhoused as lazy. The narrative goes that if people just work hard, they will be provided for, that everyone has the same opportunity, and that if you just put your nose to the grindstone, study and work hard, that you can make it. For the last several years in the United States, a worker who makes minimum wage and works fulltime cannot afford rent on a two-bedroom apartment in any state.ⁱⁱ

Worse yet, people add faith into this narrative of laziness. Some say if you are faithful, you will prosper. Can we be honest for a moment? Can we admit that this just isn't true? Can we accept that it doesn't work this

way? Can we own up to the fact that the devoutness of one's spiritual life has no effect on whether or not they are physically provided for? Millions of people around the world do not have access to the basic necessities of life, and some of the most sincere Christians are among them. The last thing they need is to be shamed into believing that their lack of faithfulness is the cause of their suffering.

And can we be honest about the myth that if we just work hard enough that we can make it. Poverty is much more complex than this. And not everyone has the same privileges and benefits, not everyone starts at the starting line – some can barely get in the race. There isn't equal access to education, job networks, transportation just to name a few things.

Jesus starts this parable, and many others by saying, “the kingdom of heaven is like,,,” But we haven't had a kingdom in a long time, this metaphor doesn't hold much meaning for us. Respected theologian and author Walter Brueggemann suggests that a more fitting metaphor for our time would be to talk about God's economy. What does God's economy look like? He suggests that at its most basic level, the kingdom of God, God's economy, means justice, for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the outcast, and such justice demands that the rich and super rich and the powerful be brought low enough that everyone else can have enough.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 2020, CBS had a reporter go to a mall in West Nyack, New York with some pumpkin pie.^{iv} The pie represented household wealth in the United States, 98 trillion dollars. He cut the pie into 10 even slices and he asked people to distribute the pie pieces amongst five plates representing the poorest, the lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, and wealthiest Americans. No one who tried got it correct. No one was even close to correct.

The correct answer was to give the upper 20%, the wealthiest households in America, (anyone want to guess), nine pieces of pie. The upper middle class and the middle class share one piece of pie between them. The lower middle class basically get crumbs. The poorest Americans, the bottom 20%, are left with a bill for pie, as on average, these families are in about \$6,000 of debt without other assets. The reporter added one more plate at the top to represent the top 1% and from the plate of nine pieces from the top 20% and moved four slices to the top plate. The gap has only increased since that segment aired a few years ago. The top 1% hold more wealth than the bottom 50% of U.S. households.

What is clear is that excessive wealth has no place in the kingdom of God. And there is no doubt that many wealthy people are indeed hard workers. But gaining excessive wealth also requires a good deal of luck or the right connections or previous wealth to build upon or shady dealings or any combination of the above. The rich may work hard, but I don't think it is accurate to say they work harder than the poor and that is why they are wealthy. And even if they did, in God's economics it would not entitle them to an exorbitant lifestyle while others can't afford basic necessities.

Even though some of these laborers worked much harder than others, it did not entitle them to greater pay. Rather, the landowner was concerned that they all receive "whatever is right," which came to a normal daily wage for everyone. God's notion of what is right has little to do with proportionality, but it has everything to do with ensuring that all needs are met.

I did a lot of reading this week on poverty in America. Poverty and income inequality is bad, particularly for children.^v There are very real physical and psychological barriers created or worsened by childhood

poverty. Childhood poverty has been found to actually alter brain chemistry and function. Among the 74 million children living in the United States, 11 million live in poverty.^{vi} Children of color are disproportionately impacted.

As I said, poverty is complex, and it isn't just about what is or isn't in your bank account. Poverty is not a temporary status for most individuals and families. Not everyone who lives in poverty is born poor. Plenty of people experience injuries, changes in their industry, death, divorce, mental illness, chronic illness, medical bills, and any other number of all-too-common bank-breakers that decrease their earnings significantly. But once you've become poor in the US, many tend to stay there and raise their children there. And if you're born poor, you are likely to stay poor. One of the biggest indicators of a child's success isn't how hard they work as an adult, but how much money their parents made.^{vii} And upper- and middle-class kids, regardless of their grades or performance, are more likely to make it out of college with a degree than those from low-income families.^{viii}

There are just so many systemic factors beyond someone's willingness to work that impact the poor. And if God is about anything, God is about transforming systems and upending things to level the playing field and inviting us in to do the work of creating a more just and equitable world.

We know that life isn't fair. It's a lesson we learn early in life and all of us at some point I am sure have uttered the words, "but it's not fair." And maybe that is why this parable is important. When Jesus tells a parable he isn't describing things as they are, instead he is showing the way God wants things to be. God's economy is a world where everyone has what they need, where everyone is afforded the same dignity and respect. God isn't fair either, God is more than fair. God can be disgracefully generous.

Preacher and author Barabara Brown Taylor once described this parable as, “a little like cod liver oil: You know Jesus is right, you know it must be good for you, but that does not make it any easier to swallow... it seems to reward those who have done the least while it sends those who have worked the hardest to the end of the line.”^{ix}

And just as a title can help determine how we hear a story, so it also matters with where we place ourselves in the story, with which character we might identify ourselves. And with this story, I wonder how many of us identify with the workers who are picked early in the day? The ones that work hard for what they get. Taylor says, “...isn't it interesting that 99 percent of us hear it from the front-row seats? ... It is entirely possible that, as far as God is concerned, we are halfway around the block, that there are all sorts of people ahead of us in line, people who are far more deserving of God's love than we are, ...only God can sort them all out.”

She concludes, “For reasons we may never know, God seems to love us indiscriminately, and seems also to enjoy reversing the systems we set up to explain why God should love some of us more than others of us. God is not fair; God is generous, and when we begrudge that generosity it is only because we have forgotten where we stand.”

Amen

ⁱ Amy Jill Levine, “Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi.” Chapter 7

ⁱⁱ <https://nlihc.org/news/nlihc-releases-out-reach-2022-high-cost-housing-0>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Walter Brueggemann, “Money and Possessions” from the Interpretation Series, Westminster John Knox Press

^{iv} www.slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/02/watch-cbs-journalist-use-pie-illustrate-inequality.html?fbclid=IwAR0BbRIG1Yo6fuu8aMCLWevBCXrrF6t7ApuMS2P_rf7oqaQVtvRhTOzY4o

^v <https://www.childrensdefense.org/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-2023-income-inequality/>

^{vi} <https://www.childrensdefense.org/the-state-of-americas-children/soac-2023-child-poverty/#:~:text=Among%20the%2074%20million%20children,11%20million%20live%20in%20poverty.>

^{vii} www.businessinsider.com/parents-determine-child-success-income-inequality-2014-1

^{viii} www.slate.com/business/2015/06/college-graduation-rates-for-low-income-students-why-poor-kids-drop-out.html?pay=1695526005786&support_journalism=please

^{ix} Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew”