

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

---

*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. 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 market-place; 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.’*

---

In early 2014, the CEO of a Seattle-based credit card processing company named Dan Price made headlines when he challenged socio-economic norms. He was making around \$1,100,000 a year as the head of a company called Gravity Payments which employed about 120 people. One day, Dan walked outside and noticed one of his workers taking a smoke break and looking particularly disgruntled. Ever one to pride himself on how he treated his workers, Dan asked the worker what was up. The worker honestly replied that he was upset that he was breaking his back for this company and only getting \$35,000 a year for it. In Seattle, that was hardly a salary to support a decent living.

A few weeks later he called a company meeting and told his employees something remarkable. Dan Price had done some research and had discerned that \$70,000 was the minimum necessary wage to live comfortably in the Seattle economy. Therefore, one day, he announced to all employees that he was raising the minimum wage at Gravity Payments to \$70,000 for *everyone*. In order to make this plan financially solvable, Dan Price cut his own salary from \$1,100,00 to \$70,000 and cut the company’s profit margins.

Not surprisingly, employee morale *and* productivity went up. The week after Dan Price made the announcement, the company received more than 4,500 resumes. And, what’s even more interesting is that some of those resumes were from people who would have made 80-85 percent *less* by coming to work for Gravity Payments but were ready to do so because they were so inspired by the new model. On the day that he made the announcement, many of his employees were brought to tears. Many of his employees also started to change

the language they used to talk about their jobs; ditching the language of “this is the company I work *for*” to “this is the company I work *with*.”

But not everyone was equally pleased about Dan Price’s radical business decision. Rush Limbaugh, of course, called Dan a socialist and promised his radio listeners that the company would shortly tank. And yet, in March of this year, Dan Price reported that the company is doing just fine six years later.

But some of the greatest anger came from Dan’s employees themselves. The folks working at a salary below \$70,000, of course, were elated. But some of the folks who were already working at that pay grade were infuriated. They were mad, not because they were making any less, but because some other people were making more than they had before. It just wasn’t fair, they said.

Friends, what a perfect embodiment of today’s parable! How human it is to beg for a break ourselves and then hold resentment in our hearts when someone else gets a break. It’s just not fair, we say.

Today’s parable reminds us that we don’t worship a fair God. God is not fair; at least not by the metrics many of us use to define “fairness.” Today’s parable challenges us, especially those of us deeply embedded in a capitalist society that values people only to the amount that they are “productive.”

The setting is simple. We have a landowner who owns a vineyard and needs day laborers to harvest the grapes. He goes and collects people to work for him, finding different groups of workers at 6:00 am, 9:00 am, noon, 3:00 pm, and 5:00 pm. At the end of the day he pays everyone the same, despite how long they worked, and the people who have been working since the beginning of the day are incensed. Again, not because they have received less than what was promised them, but because others have received more than they expected.

Now there are a few things here worth noting or exploring. The first is this: when the landowner pays the workers, he starts with those who came latest. It’s as if he *wants* to create drama. He deliberately handed out the money to folks who had only worked one hour and made sure that the people who had worked for 12 hours watched while he did it. This means that the landowner is trying to make a point.

Secondly, a parable such as this deserves a bit of exploration about the life of a day laborer. Early in the morning, day laborers would wait in the marketplace and stand around hoping that landowners would come and hire them for the day. Any landowner of a vineyard with any common sense would hire all the workers he needed at 6:00 A.M. because there’s a pretty small window in which grapes can be harvested before they spoil. So the fact that the landowner repeatedly comes back to the marketplace to hire day laborers leaves us with two possibilities:

1. He’s foolish (which I don’t think is the point of this parable), or...
2. He has concern over those who are not employed and seeks to remedy that situation.

If we are to assume that this landowner is gracious, there’s another important thing to recognize and that is the *order* with which the day laborers were selected.

Think back to your school days when you went to gym class and played team games like kickball, for example. Perhaps you remember, as I do, a particularly cruel ritual which was the selection of players on a team. Typically, two team captains were selected and they were brought out in front while everyone else stood

as a group. The team captains would take turns selecting team members. There was no greater feeling of pride for those who were selected first. They, after all, were the biggest, the fastest, and the strongest. There was also no greater feeling of shame for those who were selected last. For the record, I was never picked first and was definitely in the lower 50% percentile of those chosen first.

If you think about this particularly cruel ritual, then you probably have a decent understanding of how day laborers were selected. The youngest and strongest day laborers were selected first and the oldest, weakest, and disabled workers were chosen last, if at all. Today's text, I believe, supports this truth. The parable does not suggest that the reason for the day laborers idleness in the marketplace is laziness. In fact, the parable simply suggests that the reason they were still standing around idle was because they had been there all day and hadn't been selected, probably because they weren't "the cream of the crop."

So the landowner in today's parable did the unthinkable: he went out late in the day, and hired a bunch of older, weaker workers that no one else deemed worthy of employment and then paid them the same amount he did the younger, healthier workers that had been working all day.

This parable tells us at least two truths.

First of all, the Kingdom of Heaven has room for a lot of things, but it doesn't have room for our pride. We have a terrible habit as human beings of comparing ourselves to others; it's hardwired within us. But such a trait can seek to subvert the radical graciousness of God. The parable's message seems simple: everything comes from God and, therefore, belongs *to* God, which means God's grace is God's to disperse. You and I don't get to dictate the terms of God's graciousness. There is much justice work to be done and, frankly, there is no time for us squabble with one another and throw hissy fits when God extends God's justice to people who are different than us.

Secondly, in some ways, I feel like today's passage serves as a potent critique to the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies that are so pervasive in this country right now. Often, the argument against immigration often has to do with the time of arrival. The argument goes something like this: "Me and my family have been here for generations and we're the true 'Americans.' We're the ones who deserve this country's freedoms and opportunities and how dare you let 'those people' in here to enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities!"

Now, of course, the irony in this statement is overwhelming. Unless your ancestors were Native Americans or slaves, your family came here as an immigrant. But all that irony aside, it would not be much of a stretch to rewrite today's parable and make it be about immigration, or LGBTQIA+ rights, civil rights, or women's rights, or healthcare, or any number of other things that we've argued about as a country over the past century.

The truth of today's parable is this: the work of the Kingdom of Heaven should compel us, here and now, to redefine our metrics of merit. We need this parable to remind us that God calls us to value another human's life far beyond simply their capacity to produce goods and services. People deserve a living wage. People deserve healthcare. People deserve dignity. People deserve these things not because they've "earned" them but simply because they are beloved children of God. *That* is how we must redefine our metrics of merit.

Now if we take these things seriously, we will be called all manner of insults by people who get offended by these notions. But there is strong biblical precedent for such a redefinition. In fact, we need look no further than the book of Exodus.

Pharaoh valued the lives of the Israelites only so far as the extent to which they made him rich. His kingdom was based off of three things: production, production, and production. God heard the cries of the Israelites and offered them a different kind of kingdom. God saved the Israelites and brought them into the wilderness to teach them a different way of living as a community, a community where everyone has enough and not too much, where everyone was fed with manna. Remember, the interesting thing about manna was that manna spoiled if you gathered too much. Therefore, if you had the capacity to gather more than your neighbor, the next day you'd still be left with just as much as that neighbor. Not too little. Not too much. Kind of sounds like today's parable from Matthew, does it not?

This parable does leave us with unanswered questions and that's ok, that's what parables do. But what if, like last week's parable, we re-wrote today's parable with a different kind of ending? What if we imagined ourselves as the day laborers who had been working in the vineyard all day long and, instead of complaining and fussing about the other folks getting the same amount as us, we simply joined in the celebration? What if we threw a party for them, and rejoiced in the fact that generosity has the capacity to end cycles of debt and dismay?

Perhaps, above all, we should remember that Jesus did not teach us to pray "give me this day my daily bread" but instead instructed us to pray "give *us* this day *our* daily bread."

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's beloved children say:  
**Amen.**