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God's Not Fair!
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.² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace,⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.⁶ 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?'⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'⁸ 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.'⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius.¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,¹² 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.'¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?'¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'^[a]¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."^[b]

When my kids were at home, we had a saying in our family.

Just 4 little words.

Life is not fair.

You know why that was such a common saying in our family?

Because my kids loved to fight about everything—she got this, why does he have that?

That's not fair! Mom---That's not fair!

And what did I say?

That's right—***life's not fair.***

The vineyard workers who arrived first—they said essentially the same thing:

That's not fair!

And the landowner says, “that’s right”.
My business is not about being fair.

In fact, this parable is ***not just about the idea of fairness.***
 It’s ***more*** than that.

Like all of Jesus’ parables, we have to hear it, again and again.
 We have to ***LISTEN with curiosity.***
 And not ***assume*** we know what Jesus was saying.
 We have to ***put ourselves in different characters*** of the story.

If we stop with the ***easiest explanation***— we might miss what God is doing!
 We so often assume we know who God is and what God is doing—
 and it often ***benefits us***—
 our position in society, our status, our lives.
 But if we ***keep listening and asking questions***, then we learn, and grow.
 And we get challenged.

Karoline Lewis, in her commentary on this passage in Working Preacher, says this:
We hear the parables, we think we are starting to make sense of them, even begin to believe that we understand them, and then they get thrown alongside your life, the true purpose of a parable that we try very hard to forget. And then they finally do what they are meant to do — expose and disclose, uncover and unmask the many ways we accept a version of the Kingdom of Heaven that is nowhere near close to that which Jesus came to establish. They remind you, in no uncertain terms, of the work that still needs to be done, lest complacency and capitulation seep in.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/a-beatitude-kind-of-world>

So, today we are talking about this ***powerful parable of Jesus***—
 usually known as the laborers in the vineyard.
 But what if ***there’s so more*** to this story?
 What if it also has a lot to say about the ***landowner?***
 After all, it says that the ***kingdom of heaven is like a landowner....***

Now, over the years this parable has been seen as a simple allegory,
 Where the landowner is God, the first laborers are Jews,
 and the latter ones are Christians.
 And that’s anti-semitic, and wrong,

because Matthew was speaking to a Jewish audience,
and Jesus himself was Jewish.

So assuming the grumbling workers are Jews and the latter are Christians is the
wrong way to hear this.

Isn't there *more to this story?*

Aren't parables full of layers of meaning?

What if we can think beyond the moral of this, to what it *encourages us to DO?*

Amy Jill-Levine says that sometimes parables

are designed to *comfort the afflicted,*

but other times they are designed to *afflict the comfortable.*

And the truth is *WE are often the comfortable who need to be afflicted!*

Amy Jill-Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, HarperOne: NY, 2014.

So, this landowner went out first thing

and hired laborers *for the usual daily wage...*

And then went back at *9am, noon, 3pm and 5pm!*

Why — we have no idea!

Maybe there was lots of work to do?

Maybe he felt for these workers?

Haven't you seen day laborers in Matawan, hoping for work?

Maybe the landowner went out because he wanted to help eager people get work.

Regardless, he promises the later workers that he would *pay 'what is right'.*

So, at the end of the day, he pays the workers, *starting with those hired at 5pm!*

And those 1-hour workers are paid the usual daily wage,

Just like the workers that came first thing in the morning!

So we know what happens next.

It sounds a lot like my kids—the first ones say: *that's not fair!*

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² 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.'

Sound familiar?

Sounds a little bit like the *Elder brother of a certain prodigal son*---telling his Father : *'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed you, yet you have never given me even a young goat to*

celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ *But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets...you killed the fatted calf for him!*

And what did the dad say?

'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.' ³² *But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'* ”

That Elder brother, and those first laborers, have a feeling of **ENTITLEMENT**.

So, ***I wonder if this feeling of entitlement sounds familiar to US?***

Don't we often feel entitled to the goodness of God?

For who we are, and what we've done?

After all, we're here today—in church! Not skipping worship!

And, most of us have **money, power, status**—even if we don't think about it.

Some of us are **white**.

Some are **male**.

Some of us are **straight**—all positions of power.

All of us are Christians.

And what about people like us--who **have been in churches for a long time?**

How often have we said things like,

“I've been here 40 years and I know all about that....

or I've been here 20 years and this is how it's always done”.

How often have we acted out of **superiority, power, and status?**

How often have we **begrudged a new person or youth** their opportunity to do something new? Or share their gifts?

And what if there's another layer to this story and the feeling of entitlement?

What if it has a lot to say to **a church and a country full of IMMIGRANTS?**

How often do we assume that the people arriving earlier are the ones who **belong?**

The ones in **power?** The ones who are **'legitimate'?**

But isn't it **just LUCK** that some got here before others?

I mean most Americans ARE immigrants, or from immigrant families—so why are we **so hostile to those who come later?**

Same with the laborers in the vineyard.

The story does **not say anything that distinguishes** the early from the later workers.

Nothing.

Not that some work harder, or look different, or have different backgrounds.

Just that they are **all laborers, and the landowner hires them**—at 5 different times.

What if this story reminds us---
that ***God doesn't reward us according to what we DESERVE—***
which is actually GREAT NEWS!

Because aren't ***we all late to the vineyard***, in a way?
We assume we are the first ones,
But what if ***we are the last ones*** hired?
And God gives us just ***what we need—enough for the day***.
We complain, but God gives enough,
just like the ***manna in the wilderness*** in Exodus 16.
It was just enough food—for each day—for every person.

What if this story is describing ***the unbelievable generosity of God?***
And the ***provision of God?***
That ***God gives and gives***,
not according to merit, but out of goodness and ***grace!***
And God gives ***enough***.
Enough to everyone--Like the manna.

And what if we ***have a lot to learn from the laborers?***
Haven't we accused God—by saying: this is not fair!
Haven't we protested something that benefited someone else—not us?

Envy is real, right? For all of us!
Why? Well, one reason is that we live in a world of comparison.
Social media is built on comparison---Facebook, X, Instagram, Youtube---
They are all about looking better, sounding better, being better than someone else.
And here in this story we see the ***result*** of that:
The sin of ENVY, causing all kinds of harm.
That envy is in the manna story too.
Apparently, to envy and complain is human!

The early workers said to this landowner:
These last worked only one hour, and you have made them EQUAL to us!
Ooh, talk about envy!
But, on the other hand, don't these grumbling laborers ***have a point?***
It ISN'T fair, is it?
For all to be paid the same amount--for different hours of work?
That IS crazy, isn't it?

But, the landowner says: ‘*Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not **agree with me** for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; **I choose to give** to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? **Or are you envious because I am generous?***^[a] ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’^[b]

Are you envious because I am generous?

Wow.

How often have we been envious---

and not celebrated someone else’s blessings and joy?

How often have we thought— ***why did THEY get that?***

They don’t even ***deserve*** it!

They won’t ***appreciate*** it!

Why didn’t that blessing come ***to me?***

This week while studying this passage I read a great story:

A modern version of this parable.

In 2015, Dan Price, CEO of Gravity Payments in Seattle, announced he was slashing his one million dollar salary to raise the base salary for workers at his company to \$70,000.

He believes this is the minimum amount a person needs to live in the Seattle area.

His business advisors thought him crazy,

but because he was willing to bear the cost himself, they let him do it.

At first Price was celebrated, as the ***champion*** of a true living wage, someone addressing the problem of income inequality in the US.

Hailed as a hero of the working class,

analysts predicted other businesses would follow his example.

But then he was ***accused of driving wages*** up in Seattle,

And critics said he would lead to more unemployment.

Within the company, ***Price lost talented employees who felt slighted.***

They grumbled against the CEO,

And said it didn't seem fair to double the pay of new hires while long-term employees got only a modest raise.

Dan Price held firm, and now it is paying off.

Gravity has gained dozens of new clients, productivity and morale is high.

Wages in Seattle haven't skyrocketed,

some business owners inspired by Price, have raised entry-level pay.
 And for Dan Price, paying people a fair wage has brought out the best in his workers. Shawnthea Monroe, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary*, Year A, Volume 3, pg. 332.

What if The landowner is like God---and we are called to be LIKE the landowner?

What if acting like that helps to bring the kingdom of heaven—here on earth!
 This landowner ***keeps hiring*** laborers,
 And inviting people to the vineyard.
 This landowner pays them all ***generously***.
 Of course, the landowner disrupts business as usual,
 and turns expectations upside down---***but isn't that ultimately good news, for all?***

And what if we ***learned to REJOICE with those who rejoice?***
 And ***celebrate with those who have received blessings*** from God?

There is ***so much to be GRATEFUL for***.
 It seems trite to say ***we should count our blessings and be grateful***.
 But it's true, isn't it?
Gratitude changes lives---especially ours.
 Gratitude for God's generosity, and our own generous acts,
 Can literally change the world!
 That is the ***Good News!***

May we ***stop comparing*** ourselves to one another.
 May we let go of the envy.
 And may we ***be grateful***, for the generosity of God, and ***act generously in return***.
 And for that gift of gratitude, all God's people can say together, Amen.