

Whose Justice?  
Matthew 20:1-16  
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*“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”* Matthew 20:16

And he told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. These words, from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, seem to summarize the preaching ministry of Jesus. Over and over again in the gospels Jesus gathers a crowd of followers together and speaks to them, not in propositional assertions or creedal statements, but through the telling of stories. Let me tell you a story: A sower went out to sow. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. There was a man who had two sons. And suddenly we are in very deep theological waters.

It is as if there are some truths so profound, so close to the heart of the gospel, that only a story can describe them.

The parable was such a powerful tool for Jesus because through it he transformed everyday, mundane events and objects... a mustard seed, yeast mixed with flour, a net thrown into the sea, a landowner who went out to hire laborers... into sacred channels for divine truth. When Jesus spoke of God's kingdom, he used parables that invited his listeners to see the ordinary in an extraordinary way. We do the same thing today. When someone comes forward to be baptized in this congregation, the water that is used is no different from what you may have used to wash your hands only moments before. And yet, in the mystery of the sacrament, it is transformed, just as ordinary bread and grape juice become for us a taste of the heavenly banquet. As Will Willimon has written, “To be a Christian is, in part, to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that we are meant to look at the world with different standards of judgment than those that operate in the world.”<sup>i</sup>

A parable does exactly that, reframes our vision of the ordinary world. And each one has a punch line, a moment of revelation, a surprise turn that shocks and sometimes even offends listeners. Often the story is going along exactly as we would expect, nothing remarkable: A shepherd is trying to keep track of one hundred aimless dumb sheep, and, of course, one of them gets away. Gets lost. But then, the punch line comes: the shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep behind to chase after the one that was lost. And in this surprise turn at the end, we see clearly displayed the difference between our world (practical, moderate, rational) and the kingdom of God (extravagant, unrestrained, imprudent).

The turning point of this morning's parable is hard to miss. The day laborers are all lined up, ready to receive their just wage for work completed. Some are sweaty and tired from a full day of work in the fields under the hot sun. Others have just finished their first hour of work and have barely even broken a sweat. The landowner begins with those who arrived on the scene last and gives them each a whole denarius, the fair wage for a full day's work. You can imagine the excitement building in the line as those who were hired first, those who had put in a full day of work, arrive in front of the landowner to receive their pay. And here is the punch line of the parable, "each of them received the usual daily wage." What would have been an acceptable payment only moments before is now an outrage. Those who worked all day and those who barely even showed up are given the same amount of pay. And, Jesus says, this is what the kingdom of God looks like.

This parable offends our sense of justice, of fairness, of what is right. Along with the laborers who came early in the morning, many of us read this story and find ourselves angry with the workers who were hired late in the afternoon. They got something for nothing. A handout. They were taking advantage of the system. And with such a sense of entitlement, they just walk right up to the landowner and take a full day's wage for one hour of work. You can just hear the grumbings.

"I don't see why my hard-earned money should go to help those who don't seem to care whether they make it or not."

"Why are our tax dollars being spent to feed and clothe people who haven't done anything to deserve either? Most of them don't even have jobs."

"If they wanted to make more money, they could. Just get more education or work harder."

Oh, the timelessness of these stories that Jesus tells.

The early morning laborers are indignant at the injustice of their equal pay. And to their anger, the landowner responds: "Are you envious because I am generous?"

And here, it seems to me, is the key to unwrapping the meaning of this parable. Notice that the landowner does not claim for a moment to be fair—instead he defends his action on the grounds of generosity.

Certainly when laid down next to the most common understandings of justice in our time, the landowner in Jesus' parable comes up short. He does not offer equal pay for equal work. He does not reward those who worked the longest

hours or performed the largest portion of the task. His is not a system of payment that we would call fair.

But remember, this parable is not told to describe a vineyard, or a factory, or a flawless economic system. This parable begins, for the kingdom of heaven is like..."

In college, for a class on the Philosophy of Aristotle, we were assigned a book by Alasdair MacIntyre that is titled, "Whose Justice? Which Rationality?"<sup>iii</sup> (I never dreamed I would be able to work that book into a sermon!) MacIntyre's central argument in the book is that justice, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. What justice is depends greatly on the context in which it is defined.

And in the vineyard that is kingdom of heaven, Jesus explains, justice looks entirely different than it might in your vineyard or mine. This is because it is God's justice, which looks more like generosity than fairness. It looks more like compassion than retribution. It looks more like grace than payback.

Take, for example, the dialogue between the landowner and the last-hour laborers, which Jesus spends some time lingering over as he tells the parable. The landowner says to the workers, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They respond with one of the most heartbreaking lines in all of scripture: "Because no one has hired us."

The text does not say why they were not hired. A friend of mine, Craig Kocher at Duke University, speculates in this week's *Christian Century*: "Perhaps they did not have the needed skill set. Maybe they could not speak the language, lacked a proper education or were missing a green card. Maybe they could not afford the increasing gas prices and had to walk, or stayed home that morning with a sick child. Perhaps there simply were not enough jobs to go around. Whatever the reason, they were left out.

But like the old man in the rowboat in New Orleans who kept going back into the flooded city, Jesus says the landowner desperately wants everyone to have a place in the vineyard. He cannot stomach the thought of anyone left behind, so he says to the last unhired workers, "Go into the vineyard."<sup>iii</sup>

And those who had been waiting all day, left behind and forgotten, are given the chance to go and work. And not only that, they are given a full day's wage, enough to get by for one more day. And, Jesus says, this is what the kingdom of God looks like.

In other words, God is not your average employer. God might never make it in business in the real world. This boss's chief concern is not the crop or his own bottom line but rather the laborers themselves. When the landowner returns to the labor pool late in the day, Jesus does not say that he hired more harvesters

because there was more to do or so that his harvest would be greater. No, the landowner is motivated by the laborers need of work, and not his need of workers.

This is a picture of the kingdom of God. It looks like a justice founded on seeing people and not profit. It looks like an open invitation to all of creation to come and join in the joyful labor of the gospel. It looks like less focus on work and more focus on workers. It looks like justice redefined by mercy and compassion.

Whose justice? God's justice, which begins at the end, with those who are most forgotten in our world.

In the parable, the landowner recognizes that the waiting is at least as hard as the working. Standing idle, nervously waiting to be hired, knowing full well that if you are not, your family may not be able to pay the bills.

I think of all of the wonderful people I have been privileged to meet in this city who know a thing or two about what it is like to stand at the back of that line, hoping that there is enough for them after everyone else has been paid. Who know something of what it is to wait in parking lots hoping that today might be different and that work might come. Who know something about returning at the end of the day without enough to get by. Who never stop hoping and praying for that day when this parable will become the new reality, when the landowner will call to them at the end of the line and invite them to come forward and receive their payment first—fair wages, enough to survive. It is justice, make no mistake about that. It is a different kind of justice.

The kind of justice that demands we value people more than possessions, that we lean into God's generosity, which ensures abundance not just for a few, but for all who are invited to the kingdom feast. And that, my friends, is everyone.

Can you imagine a world that resembles the kingdom vineyard, where everyone has opportunity and hope? What would it take for us to live into the power of this parable? How can we describe this kind of justice?

Let me tell you a story It is an old Jewish parable about a father and two sons. The father was an ideal mentor. He took his boys to the fields as soon as they were big enough to walk and taught them all he knew about farming. When he died, instead of dividing their inheritance they continued to work together in partnership, each contributing his best gifts and dividing every harvest down the middle. One of the brothers married and had eight children, the other remained a bachelor.

One night, during a particularly bountiful harvest, the bachelor brother thought to himself, "My brother has ten mouths to feed and I have only one. He really needs more of this harvest than I do. However, I know him. He is much too fair to

renegotiate our agreement. I know what I will do. I'll take some of my harvest and slip it over in his barn at night so that he can have more for his family."

At the very same time, the married brother was thinking to himself, "God has blessed me with this wonderful family. My children will take care of us when we are old. My brother is not as fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest to provided for his old age, but I know him. He is far too fair to renegotiate our agreement. I know what I will do. I'll take some of my harvest and slip it into his barn to build up a nest egg for the future."

As you might have anticipated, one night when the moon was full these brothers came face-to-face, each on a mission of generosity. And the Rabbis who used to tell this parable said that although there was not a cloud in the sky, a gentle rain began to fall, as God wept for joy because two of his children had gotten the point.<sup>iv</sup>

The mission of the church, to adapt the slogan of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, is to work for a world that is as just and generous as God's grace.

It is a labor of love to which we have all been called. It is a labor of joy that will fulfill your deepest human needs. And it is a labor of justice. Whose justice? The justice of God Almighty, who longs for a world where all receive from the abundance of creation. And no one, no one, is left behind.

The last will be first, and the first will be last.

It is the ultimate parable punch line. It is justice redefined by generosity. It is good news for all of us.

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<sup>i</sup> Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* (September 2005).

<sup>ii</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press), 1989.

<sup>iii</sup> Craig Kocher, *The Christian Century* (September 9, 2008). p 23.

<sup>iv</sup> This story appears in John Claypool, *Stories Jesus Still Tells: The Parables*. (Cambridge: Cowley Publications), 1993. pp 34-35.