

August 27, 2017

*“Are You Envious?”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 20:1-15

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Let me ask you today, don't you love the parables and the stories of Jesus? Because what kind of stories did Jesus tell? He told stories about God's love and mercy and forgiveness toward all of us. About a father who extravagantly welcomes home his wayward son who returns after blowing all his money, taking up drugs and alcohol, and running up a huge credit card bill. Yet the father throws him a feast. About a shepherd searching and calling out for a sheep that left the fold, lost and wandering without any direction, hoping that he might find her again. And when she is found, there is great rejoicing. About a man who is in such debt to his master that even in a lifetime he couldn't pay back what he owes, and yet the master forgives the entire debt! The slate is wiped clean. What a promise that is for us! About the eternal home that awaits us, his followers. He said the kingdom of God is like a great treasure hidden in a field, a lavish wedding feast, a pearl more precious than any other, more valuable than all the riches this earthly life could ever give us. That's what heaven's like! Yes, these stories move us, not only with their beauty and virtue, but because their message gives us hope. You see, these stories are really about us and our lives. And when we hear them, we are filled with hope and comfort and peace.

But then we hear today's parable. About workers in a vineyard hired at different times during the day, yet all paid the same amount of wages. And this is a difficult story for us to come to terms with because it doesn't make sense to us. What kind of “just” God would do this to those who worked hard all day? It seems so unfair. Especially since our culture teaches us things like, “the early bird gets the worm.” “No pain, no gain.” And, “A fair day's pay for a fair day's work.” Author Thomas Carlyle comments, “This is as just a demand as governed men could ever make. It is the everlasting right of man. A fair day's pay for a fair day's work.”

So let's review the parable, keeping in mind that God is the landowner, and you and I are those in the marketplace. It's harvest season in the vineyard, and time is of the essence. There is a relatively narrow window in which the grapes must be picked in order to prevent them from rotting on the vine before it's too late. So this vineyard owner needs people to help him reap the harvest. Now the custom in the ancient world was that laborers wishing to find work went to the middle of the town square, the marketplace, and waited to be chosen by someone. The standard wage of the time for a day's work was a single coin – a denarius, which was really the smallest amount on which a family could exist. The

typical day began at 6:00am and ended at 6:00pm. So at 6:00am on this particular day, the landowner goes into town, finds a group of workers, agrees with them for a denarius, and sends them into the vineyard. Later, at 9:00am, he goes back to town, finds more workers and agrees to pay them “whatever is right.” He does the same thing again at noon, 3:00 pm and 5:00 pm, agreeing to pay them “whatever is right.” So those who came in at 5:00 pm worked for only one hour, versus the twelve hours of those hired first. Yet, when the landowner goes to hand out the pay, each and every one was given the same – a single denarius. And the complaining begins. “How could you do this? We’ve been out here since sunrise, sweating it out under the hot sun, working hard for you. And here are these late comers, who must not have been good enough to be chosen in the first place, and you’ve made them equal to us. This is outrageous! It’s not fair!” But the landowner responds with, “Didn’t I pay you what we agreed to? What harm have I done to you? Or, are you envious because I am generous?”

And that is this week's God question. "Are you envious because I am generous?" Let that ruminate in your minds and hearts for a moment. Because what this question really does is make us examine ourselves and our feelings toward others. “Are you envious, envious, because I am generous?” Envy. Such a small word, but with such a big influence. For envy is always selfish and resentful. Envy wants what others have simply because they have it, and bears grudges against those who have what it doesn't have. And in the end, envy accuses God of being unfair. Let me expand. Envy tells us that self gratification is a virtue and a right. It begins when we look at the people around us, our neighbors, friends, people in the news or on television and say, “I wish I had the lifestyle, the body, the talent, the job, the possessions, the relationships, that person has.” And just look at how the culture thrives on getting us to think this way. We’re bombarded with advertisements and messages telling us that our lives will be so much better, so much more fulfilled if we just had the right products to make us look better, the latest conveniences to make our lives easier, the right possessions to make us respected and admired. And look at what has resulted.

Not only do we put pressure on ourselves trying to achieve all this, but if we don't have these things, we lose self confidence and become dissatisfied with our own lives. And worse, it puts up a barrier between us and other people. Because again, envy is not just that we want what someone else has, but it is also that we don’t want them to have it. Erma Bombeck once captured the essence of envy in her humorous prayer, “Lord, if you cannot make me thin, at least make my friends look fat.” Yes, the more we watch and wish and dwell on other people, the more we find ourselves disgruntled, discontent and

ungrateful. Envy makes us become competitors with other people, and we find reason after reason why they don't deserve what they have. We've kept score, and we're envious because God has been too generous with them, and has not given us what we deserve. And there it is – God being unfair.

But let's stop a minute and be honest. What are we deserving of? Should God really give us what we deserve? If God were a calculating God, handing out merit points for our humble and holy prayers, our selfless acts of compassion and service, our forgiving and merciful hearts, our kind and gentle words, our open handed generosity, our work toward peace and justice, our bold willingness to share our faith with others... then, okay, how much do we deserve? But as we look in the mirror, do we really want to answer that question. Fortunately, however, ours is a God who doesn't keep score, doesn't give us what we deserve, but rather, offers us grace – mercy and forgiveness. In his book, “*What's So Amazing About Grace?*” author Philip Yancey, writes, “Jesus' (parable about the landowner is really a parable) about grace, which cannot be calculated like a day's wage. Grace is not about finishing first or last; it is about not counting. (Because) if I care to listen, I hear a loud whisper from the gospel that I did not get what I deserved. I deserved punishment and got forgiveness. I deserved wrath and got love. I deserved debtor's prison and got a clean credit history. I deserved stern lectures and crawl-on-your-knees repentance and I got (the) banquet (of Christ) spread for me.” When you think about this, isn't it wonderful that none of us get what we *deserve* from God.

You see, this parable really shows us that we have a God who is extravagantly generous to all, who loves each and every one of us equally and unconditionally, and does not calculate what we are worth or deserving of. Remember, Jesus didn't say, “Running Walmart or Apple or Uber or anything of this world is like...” He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” We all know that the things of this world are competitive, unjust, unfair and unequal. They always have been and always will be. But not in God's world. And Jesus is telling us here that we can't make a comparison of God's world – God's heavenly kingdom, to the norms and standards of this world. And so this parable that on the surface first seems so unreasonable, is really again a promise of God's love and mercy and forgiveness. And, we should be overjoyed.

So how do we apply today's parable in our world, our culture today. Well, imagine for a moment being one of those last workers chosen. Waiting all day for someone to pick you. Maybe some of you had the same childhood experience I did. My athletic abilities left something to be desired, and I remember the

pain of gym class when it came time to play softball or kickball. We'd all line up on the field and the teacher would designate two captains, the best athletes, who would then pick their teams from the line up of students. And, inevitably, I would be one of the last chosen, standing there waiting in the schoolyard marketplace, just because I did not have the skills that were so highly coveted on the ball field. And aren't there people in our society left standing, waiting, feeling passed by because of circumstances that we cannot even imagine? A lack of education, poor parental upbringing, mired in poverty. Can't we wish for them to share in the abundant life God wants for all of His children? Can't we weep over those who are hungry, who are hopeless, who are despairing? Instead of being envious that they might get something they don't deserve, can't we offer them grace that wants God's best for them? Imagine if those who were hired first, saw the others getting the same wage, and instead of being envious, they offered grace. Imagine them saying, "I'm so happy for you. We all need a denarius to survive. I'm glad your family will get to eat tonight."

Yes, this parable is not about fairness or what we deserve. Instead, it's a reminder of God's extravagant love for all of us. So think for a moment of all your blessings. (Pause.) And now answer the question. "Are you envious because God is generous?" Amen.