

July 19, 2020

“Workers in the Marketplace”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 20:1-15

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I think this parable we just heard might be a lot more understandable, a lot more meaningful for many of us now, because of the pandemic we're going through. Because instead of laborers standing idle in the marketplace, the parable could be about the many workers who have lost their jobs due to the shutdown. Or, about the many business owners going bankrupt or closing down. Or, about students who are being deprived of a proper education. And instead of a generous landowner, we have a generous government that is trying to alleviate some of the hardships people are going through by providing them with a much needed denarius. Many have received a \$1200 payment. Some are receiving an additional \$600 a week while they're out of work. Many businesses have received an interest-free loan from the government that might even be totally forgiven if certain conditions are met. And schools are doing their best to plan for the fall to provide effective instruction and lessons. Plus, the government is planning to provide even more relief if necessary. And I might also add, there are many people who have given away the money they received from the government to those who need it even more. And many companies are doing their best to provide their employees the flexibility they need to work from home and take care of their children. In all these cases, many of those individuals and families who might have been left standing, alone and vulnerable, in the marketplace, are receiving a denarius of sorts. In a different time, in a different place, and in a different country, this may not have happened. So praise be to God for his blessings and goodness.

And yet, and yet, there are some people who begrudge those cash payments and loans and benefits that others are receiving. Saying, “That’s not fair! It’s not fair.” Why should so many continue to get paid if they're not working? Why are some people getting \$600 a week while I have to work at Stop & Shop for a lot, lot, less? Why did that particular organization get a loan? They definitely don't need it! We're only going to have to pay for all this through higher taxes in the long run. So let's listen with new ears at today's parable and the feeling and attitude the story might provoke in us.

Jesus tells of a landowner who went to the marketplace early to hire workers for his vineyard. These men worked all day in the hot sun to collect the usual daily wage, a single coin, called a denarius. Then at the end of the day, they find out that other workers came later – some in the middle of the day and some so late they only worked one hour without hardly even breaking a sweat. And those workers who

were last in line coming to the vineyard, effectively not working at all, not only got paid first, they got paid the exact same denarius! Now you could just imagine what the reaction was of those latecomers – happiness and cheers and laughter and gratitude. But, if you were one of the first into the vineyard, working all day, what would your reaction be? You'd probably be upset, or envious, thinking, "That's not fair!" It's not fair! Why should someone who didn't work as hard as we did, who didn't put in all that time, receive the exact same pay, get the exact same reward that we earned? That's a good question.

But it's a question that's really easy to answer. You see, Jesus tells us this parable because he knows we humans tend to rationalize our thinking in... well, human terms. But this is a mistake. As Christians, we need to consider God's way of thinking, versus our way of thinking. So here Jesus helps us make that distinction by comparing the laborers in the marketplace with you and I, and how we live our lives before God. Because in the parable, the vineyard owner is, of course, God, and you and I are the workers, his children. And God loves all his children, the same. Exactly the same - no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been, no matter how late you've come into his vineyard – his presence. No this parable isn't about how employers are to treat their employees. That misses the point. This parable is all about how God treats his children, you and I: with extravagant love, generosity, forgiveness and grace. Think of your own sons and daughters and grandchildren. Are they all the same? No! Perhaps some have strayed? Some are more difficult to deal with than others? Yet, you love them, don't you? You love them all the same. And, in your heart, you want to treat them equally, fairly, no matter what they've done. You want only the best for them, don't you? Well, it's the same with God and us.

You see, in the parable, that one denarius coin that we think represents a full day's pay is much more important. That denarius, that coin, represents more than money. It represents the kingdom of heaven, abundant, meaningful life with God. And God wants all of us to get that coin. Notice, Jesus didn't say, "Running a business is like a landowner who goes out." He said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes out." And God, the landowner, chooses to treat those who were last in line going into the vineyard, with as much love and forgiveness and generosity as those who were first in line going into the vineyard. It may not be "fair" as we define fair in earthly terms, but God doesn't want to deny any of His children the joys of his kingdom. And that's really good news for you and me if we're honest with ourselves. Because when it comes to where we stand before God, could we be mistaken about where we are in line? Could it be possible that we are more at the end of the line; that we have

come late to the vineyard, or are even still waiting in the marketplace, when it comes to certain character or personality traits or certain aspects of our lives? When it comes to sins we ignore or habits we refuse to change? For instance, some of us may be at the end of the line when it comes to anger. When things don't go the way we want, or someone says something we don't like, or life throws us an unexpected curve, we react with hurtful words, or with physical or emotional cruelty. Some of us might be at the end of the line when it comes to humility. We let our pride cloud our eyes and we look down at others with a sense of self-importance, arrogance, and superiority. Some of us might be at the end of the line when it comes to the forgiveness and mercy that God calls us to give. We just can't bring ourselves to take that step of reaching out, of seeking reconciliation, of mending fences. Some of us might be at the end of the line when it comes to self-control. We can't seem to say no to that addiction – food, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, shopping. Some of us may be at the end of the line when it comes to keeping up our relationship with God. We're lax when it comes to our prayer life, ambivalent about growing our spiritual life. Yes, each and every one of us are at the end of some line aren't we – envy, greed, lust, gossip, impatience, or, you name it. But that's exactly why this parable is such good news for us. Author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "(This parable reveals that) God is not fair, but depending on where you are in line, that can sound like powerful goodness. Because if God is not fair, then there is a chance we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, even though we are last in line – not because of who *we* are, but because of who *God* is. God is not fair; God is *generous*, and when we are envious because of that generosity, it is only because we have forgotten where we stand."¹

Our Lord God wants to give you that denarius coin – a place with him forever. And he'll keep coming back to the marketplace looking for you. Because his love and grace far supersedes our human sense of what is right or wrong or fair. And nowhere is that love and grace epitomized more than by Christ's going to the cross. Because from that cross, did he cry out, "It's not fair!" No! No, he did not. What he did cry out was, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is God's love for us – full of mercy and forgiveness and generosity. And get this... even as a final extraordinary example, while hanging on that cross, our Lord Jesus, God, took one more person from the marketplace, one more person from the very end of the line – the criminal hanging on the cross next to him. Do you remember what the man said to Jesus? In sorrow and humility and repentance, he said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And right then and there, Jesus gave him a denarius, and assured him – "Today you will be with me in paradise."

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*.

To quote Brown-Taylor again, “On any given day of our lives, when the sun goes down and a cool breeze stirs the dusk, when the work is all done and the steward heads toward the end of the line to hand out the pay, there is a very good chance that the cheers and laughter and gratitude with which he is greeted will turn out to be your own.” Like I said before - praise be to God for his blessings and goodness.