

Justice That Is Deeper Than Fairness

Matthew 20: 1-16, Second Sunday in Lent

March 17, 2019

Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

After reading this morning's scripture to the small Tuesday morning Bible Study group, I asked the ladies if they had any initial reactions to this challenging text. BOO!!! Proclaimed Ruth Uchtman. The women laughed and nodded in agreement. Boo says it all. It says that we do not like this parable. It does not reflect our understanding of fairness. The vineyard owner's decision to pay all the same wage for drastically different work days is a payroll policy that makes most of us uncomfortable. If you are like me, you are grumbling right along with the workers in the back of the line -- the ones who have been working since 6 am, when the owner has the nerve to pay them the same amount he paid workers who arrived at the vineyard eleven hours later.

How do you think the workers responded to the vineyard owner the next morning? I doubt they were anxious to get to work.

We are willing to earn our compensation, but there is an expectation that we will earn more if we work more, which is why this parable, and God's divine generosity, doesn't work for us. New Testament Professor at Bethel Seminary, Jeannine Brown, states it plainly: "God's generosity is an affront to those who think about God's benevolent rule in categories of status, privilege, and what one has earned" (Brown 2019). God's generosity challenges the many systems built upon status differences and privilege that result in enabling some people to have what they need, while others go in want.

In the United States, more money doesn't just mean a bigger house or a fancier car, it means fresher food, better doctors, additional options, in some cases, more life.

Ruby's daughter Sara needed more life. Unfortunately, Ruby and her husband Stan could barely make ends meet, with her waiting tables at the neighborhood diner and Stan working as a mall security guard. Ruby spent hours of time she didn't have waiting with Sara in crowded doctors' office waiting rooms with dozens of others, only to have mere

minutes with a doctor who was preoccupied with his other patients. Sara's kidneys were failing. There was a new drug that might work for her, but the doctor quickly told her that the drug cost \$10,000 each month, and the conversation ended. Ruby left the office in tears.

In desperation and frustration, Ruby and her two friends, Annie and Beth, who also had difficult money issues, took matters into their own hands and robbed a grocery store. During the robbery, it becomes clear to all viewers that NBC's *Good Girls* have a rather large streak of bad in them. But the robbery was successful -- the women got the cash they needed.

The next scene includes Ruby and Sarah in a very different doctor's office, a large well decorated sunlit room with just three people in it -- Ruby, Sara and the doctor, who seems to have all the time in the world to talk with Ruby, and offers them free trials of that expensive drug, which ends up working well for Sara. Ruby and Sara rejoice at being able to give their daughter what she needs; to give her enough to live.

That morning at the marketplace, the vineyard owner and the laborers who were to work for him agreed on the usual daily wage: one denarius, which was enough money to feed a peasant family for one day.

At the end of the day, the owner paid the workers just what he had promised them -- one denarius. Yet, that no longer was acceptable to the workers, having seen him also give the 5 o'clock hired hands the same wage. But it was still enough for *all* the workers to provide for their families that day. The owner had made a commitment to pay not only the early workers enough but all of the workers enough. The owner chose justice over fairness.

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 20: 16). Like it or not, we are bound for a kingdom characterized by a complete status reversal.

Our scripture on Ash Wednesday told us that it was the humble child that was the greatest in heaven -- one with no status, one most vulnerable. Then, last week we were told that the kingdom of heaven was like a king who forgave his slave's debts. This morning, we

are challenged to understand how the kingdom of heaven is like the vineyard owner; a kingdom of divine generosity. We are challenged to understand that our God brings about justice that is deeper than fairness...justice that on its surface seems unfair; justice that is given out of God's divine generosity; generosity given to God's beloved, given to us all.

We are *all* God's beloved. God's love is big enough for *all* of us to be favored ones in God's eyes. We hear this message constantly, and have since we were little with songs like Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Yet it is in stark contrast to the messages we often hear in our lives: second place is really the first loser, Being Best is Great, and one particularly appropriate for our text: the early bird catches the worm. In so many areas of our culture, there are limits on who can be favored; who can be chosen, who can be the best.

Yet it is something most of us desire. One way to be favored, we learn, is to work hard, just like the early laborers do.

They serve the owner faithfully and well, and as they see the other workers come into the vineyard as the sun moves across the sky and down towards its setting, those early workers look forward to receiving the pay promised them, but also receiving the owner's favor, as the ones who have worked the most, the best, for him. If the owner is to be generous, surely the early laborers will benefit most! They have earned it.

And then the story twists and the owner seems to show favor to the ones who have worked the least by paying them a denarius for almost no work at all; the owner practically gives his money away to those laborers.

The early laborers look on in disgust, prompting the owner to remind them of their agreement earlier that day: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?" The specific Greek word for "wrong" here is *adiko*, meaning "unjust" The landowner disavows any injustice on his part. He continues, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"(Matthew 20: 13-15) In their deep disappointment and anger for not receiving more than the late laborers, which seemed fair and right to them, those at the end of the

line miss God working in their midst; they miss God's just generosity. They cannot see that they, too, are favored by the land owner.

As we have learned from earlier teachings in Matthew, we are not to judge others, even though it is so much easier to judge them than ourselves! It is true that we see other people more clearly than we can see ourselves; it is also true that it is easier to see the goodness and justice of God *when it is given to others*, than when it is given to us. As one pastor put it, "We are too close to ourselves... to see truly what God gives us. What God, in goodness and generosity, gives us we are likely to assume is our due, something we've earned, a goodness we have fabricated for ourselves" (Willson 2013). By standing in the back of the line, those early laborers had a clear view of God's goodness and generosity as it was given to the late laborers.

The same goodness and generosity that was given to them; goodness and generosity that gave all enough for the day. Friends, we are all favored by God, and God always gives enough. As Rev. Lee Hull Moses writes in her *More than Enough: Living Abundantly in a Culture of Excess*:

"God calls us to lives of enough. Enough is not nothing. Enough has no winners or losers. No one goes hungry, and no one gets lost. Enough, with grace, is abundant life" (Moses 2016).

When my phone buzzed first thing on Friday morning, I knew something major had happened in the world. My heart sank as I read the news of the 49 Muslims killed during their evening prayers services, in the Christchurch terrorist attacks.

Enough! I thought. The repetition of senseless murder -- murder in houses of worship -- is overwhelming, heart-breaking and terrifying. From his Great Replacement manifesto, it seems that the alleged shooter, Brenton Tarrant, has a demonic sense of winners and losers in which the losers must die. White people are the winners; immigrants and Muslims are losers. When will we, as one human race, recognize that this world is big enough for us all? And that to have enough is to have abundance, God's gift to all of us.

So the last will be first, and the first will be last, and all will have enough. It is not a competition; there are no winners and losers for all are favored by God.

Friends, we are bound for a kingdom of God's deep generosity with unlimited amounts of justice, mercy and grace. Distribution is not based on what we deserve, it is based on God's justice and belief that all shall have enough. We are bound for the kingdom in which there is enough and we are all enough; there are no haves and have-nots; there are just God's beloved. We would do well to seek such a kingdom on earth by living not win but to have enough, and seek justice for others to have enough, too. Amen.

Works Cited

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