

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

When we hear this parable, we very well may think, "Unfair." For this farmer to have paid those who worked for twelve hours the same as he paid those who worked only one hour, is simply unfair. It is time to harvest the grapes. At six o'clock in the morning he hires day laborers. He goes back to the day-labor pools at nine in the morning, at noon, at three, and at five in the afternoon. When he pays the laborers, he pays those who work one hour the same as he paid those who worked twelve hours. He paid them all usual day's wage. Was this farmer generous? However, when each group came up to be paid, they also got one denarius. Those who came to work at six in the morning complained. They worked perhaps eleven hours, they worked during the hottest part of the day, and all they got was the same pay as those who worked only one hour.

It was not fair! We care deeply about fairness, especially fairness toward us. We have laws to ensure that women are paid the same for the same job as men are. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 is a law aimed at abolishing wage disparity based on gender, prohibiting a gender pay gap. Time is money in our industrialized society. Workers who are paid by the hour get paid for the number of hours they work. We can get a bit annoyed when we think our coworkers are less productive than we are. So imagine how we would feel if our coworkers worked half the hours we did and got the same pay. That goes over like a pregnant pole-vaulter. So what is the point of this parable?

Traditionally, many have interpreted this parable in terms of spiritual salvation. All Christians will receive their reward, no matter when they came to salvation. Someone who has a deathbed conversion, who comes to Jesus, just minutes before they die, will

receive the same reward as those who have been Christians for their entire life. A similar take on this parable focuses on the resentment some have toward the generosity God extend to others, God's forgiveness of others. They resent that God's forgiveness, grace, mercy, compassion, which has no bounds. These interpretations really raise more questions than answers about this parable.

How do we interpret this passage? One clue can be to look at the context. Read what precedes the passage and comes after the passage. We look at the stories we find in the preceding chapter, chapter nineteen. We find a common thread, Jesus concern for the marginalized, those who are seen as insignificant, unimportant, or powerless by society. The chapter includes Jesus' teaching about marriage and divorce. The Pharisees asked Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" In that day a husband could divorce his wife, but a wife could not divorce her husband. Women had very few rights in that day. What Jesus taught here was a more egalitarian world, a different world. Not a world of male superiority and domination; not a world of female subordination; not a world where women were marginalized. Marriage was to be a relationship of unity, a relationship that was more egalitarian.

We then have the story of the children coming to Jesus. In that day, children had a marginal place in the household. The disciples did not want these ankle-biters to bother Jesus. He has more important people to see. Jesus demands the children come to him. Jesus welcomes the children. Jesus declares that it was to the children that heaven belongs. The children represent disciples to whom heaven belongs. Children have a legitimate place in society, in the church, not a marginal place.

And then there is the story of the rich young man who comes to Jesus asking what he must do to receive eternal life. After telling Jesus that he has obeyed the commandments, Jesus then tells him to sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor. This command to sell all is not given to all who become disciples. This command to sell suggests that possessions were an issue for this man. Jesus warned of the enslaving power of wealth. He is to sell all and give it to the poor, a further act of repentance. Give to the needy, who are marginalized.

As we come to our passage, we come to the text reminded of Jesus concern for the marginalized. This is nothing new. Scripture reveals God's concern for the marginalized. God demanded that we care for the orphans and the widows. These were the people who were at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. God demands that we welcome the stranger. God's concern for the marginalized creates a different reality, an alternative reality, to that of the world. In God's alternative world, God's alternative reality, we are not to be looking out for ourselves only, but also looking out for others, particularly the marginalized. It is looking out for those who are hurting, who have needs, who, for whatever reason, cannot live with dignity and worth. God affirms the dignity and the worth of all of God's people. That is the concern of the landowner.

The farmer's response to the complaints of the laborers who worked longer hours, but got paid the same as those who worked fewer hours, is the focus of this passage. The farmer does not tell the workers that his wage structure is right and good for the following reasons he's happy to detail. Rather, he tells them it is none of their business. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Are they envious of his generosity?

As one commentator wrote, “Looking back, this theme of the landowner's initiative is clear from the beginning. He’s not a passive employer, reviewing applications that come in, hiring people who bother to follow up, and then letting them hustle for overtime and promotions. No: five times he goes out to find people, inviting them to come work for a fair day's wage.” The parable is about the landowner’s choice to give each worker enough to meet their needs. The landowner recognizes that the workers’ basic life needs are the same, regardless of what time they started work. They need the same amount of food and the same sort of shelter; they have the same need to provide for their families. By paying all of the workers the same amount, the landowner affirms their basic needs. God affirms the basic needs of even the marginalized. We see here God’s affirmation of the dignity and worth of all whom God loves and invites to be part of the kingdom.

We are called to participate in God’s mission of spreading the gospel, expanding the beloved community, and transforming the world toward greater justice and mercy. Last week we considered how God’s grace and mercy are absurd. God’s grace and mercy is so great, without limits or bounds, that it is absurd. This passage continues that message by declaring that not only is God’s grace and mercy absurd, they are unfair. Yet, is it unfair to affirm the dignity and worth of all people? Is it unfair to affirm the basic needs of the marginalized?

At the name of Jesus
every knee will bend
and every tongue confess
that Jesus is Lord
to the glory of God. Amen.