

God's Economy

Matthew 20:1-16

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Life isn't fair, is it? It can be maddening. The scripture slices right into the heart of the matter. In the story Jesus tells, a landowner goes out to the marketplace early in the morning to gather day laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing to pay them each a denarius — a day's living wage, the minimum required to keep a small family fed, housed, and clothed — he sends them off to work. During the course of the day, however, he returns to the marketplace a surprising four more times — at 9:00am, at noon, at 3:00pm, and even at 5:00, only an hour before quitting time — and recruits everyone he finds there, promising to pay them each “whatever is right” at the end of the day.

Sure enough, when the workday is over, the landowner instructs his manager to pay the laborers. But he tells him to do so in reverse order, starting with those who worked the least number of hours, and ending with those who put in a full day. The manager proceeds as directed, and pays each laborer exactly the same amount — one denarius. When the laborers who started work at the crack of dawn see this, they think, an economic windfall is coming. If the ones who worked only an hour got a denarius, just think what we will get. But, as we read, it doesn't work out that way, does it? They are enraged, and protest the blatant unfairness of the landowner: “These last have worked only one hour,” they say, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But the landowner deflects their accusations, and answers them with a question: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

With whom do you identify? The Landowner, the workers who started early in the day, or those who came in at the end? Perhaps all of them in different areas of our lives.

In one way, this parable reminds me of a situation back when my daughter, Peyton, was in the 3rd grade. Our town in Westchester County had an annual Halloween parade and party for all of the children. It was already a struggle to get my daughter to walk in the parade. She doesn't care for them much, but we marched in costume anyway with all of her friends and their moms. At the party, the Rec. Director called all of the elementary-aged children forward to stand in a line facing the crowd of parents. A small group of preselected adults went on to name 5 of the 75 or so kids as winners of the costume contest. They got medals and then everyone returned to their parents for the party. Peyton was bummed. She began comparing her outfit to others who had won wondering what was wrong with hers.

We didn't know there would be a contest. My daughter had a pretty cool outfit, I thought, and she had spent a lot of time on it. I found my momma bear instinct ignited immediately. Why couldn't ALL of the kids be given some kind of award? Why make some kids at this age feel competitive over Halloween costumes, especially when most of the winners most likely had help from their parents? Of course I knew any dialogue opened up for future party planning might be met with "that's what's wrong with our youth today. Parents do everything they can to protect and coddle their kids from getting hurt. Everyone doesn't always deserve a prize." And it was. Perhaps now I would, "True. Everyone doesn't always deserve a prize." When in the arena where competition is expected, winners who achieve success, deserve to be recognized. The winner of a race, deserves a first place prize. The student who knows all the material for a test, deserves a perfect score, etc...but this was an entirely different arena. This fun event brought out some of the worst in humanity (competition, envy and greed when it could have been a time of generosity and fun, leaving everyone feeling good at the end.)

The story in our Gospel reading might be difficult for those of us who work in this region of the country, perhaps even the world. We work ourselves to the bone...to succeed, to earn more so we will have the benefits of a decent wage, providing our children with all of the possibilities we can think of for them, so THEY can succeed. Plus, it's expensive to live around here. You have to earn a relatively high income to be here.

When others seem to get benefits without having to work hard for them, people can get pretty testy, even downright judgmental. We want it to be fair. You work hard, long enough with enough tenacity, and success can be yours. One definition of the American Dream says this: *The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, the set of ideals (democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality) in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, as well as an upward social mobility for the family and children, achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers. In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, 'life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement' regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.'* (Wikipedia: American Dream). To put that into a bit of context, remember what was going on in 1931...That was 2 years before the end of the Great Depression, and near the end of Prohibition; it was also in the middle of the Dust Bowl, when thousands of families left their farms in the Midwest. *The Dust Bowl exodus was the largest migration in American history within a short period of time. Between 1930 and 1940, approximately 3.5 million people moved out of the Plains states; of those, it is unknown how many moved to California.* (Wikipedia) It wasn't an easy time by any means, but as people began to recover economically, the American Dream began to take shape...at least for some. Remember, that was long before the Civil Rights movement or the Women's movement, when the idea of equality and equal opportunity moved forward in strides.

All of that has nothing to do with God, you know. God's economy is not the economy of the United States or any other country. That's what's so challenging for us, isn't it? At least for me it

is. We are inundated culturally with the American Dream ethos that we can and should make it big, and if we don't, well, we're losers, failures. There's something wrong with us. We didn't try hard enough, or we didn't utilize the opportunities or the gifts we have been given. We are judged by society and perhaps even by those whom we love with a sense of unworthiness.

Thankfully, God's economy is in another realm. Success in terms of the American Dream has NOTHING to do with spirituality. That's one of the reasons the Prosperity Gospel (that God wants us to be prosperous and rich...even financially) which is touted by some Christian megachurch pastors is abhorrent to the mainline church.

Spiritually speaking, you and I, your child and mine, are just as equal in the eye of God as the child living in the barrios of Rio, or the drug infested dens of any city. We are all equally as lovable and worthy of God's incredible generosity of Spirit. **That's a problem sometimes when we believe in the cultural economy versus God's economy.**

You may or may not know that this year is the 500th year of Martin Luther's life work resulting in the Protestant Reformation. We will celebrate it here on October 29th. Luther faithfully taught the Gospel and overturned doctrines which misinterpreted it. He recognized that no one can work enough to earn salvation from sin, that it is the grace of God that saves us, not the amount of work we do or the good deeds we amass before we die.

Luther reflects Jesus' parable in this: we are not engaged by God in a life where those who work the hardest win the right to enter heaven. Nor are we competitively engaged in producing good works, in order to earn the right to be part of the kingdom. God's incredible and generous love is available for ALL of US!

My experience in having spent a great deal of time in the developing world, is that those without much materially, for the most part, GET that God's love is free and undeserved. It's WE who have the privilege, of class and opportunity and money and race...who have the hardest time with something which is given freely and not earned.

It takes a lot of humility to see that those who don't hold the same status in society, are truly equal in the realm of God. Remember the question that is posed by the landowner in the parable? Are you envious because I am generous? Writer Mary Gordon, in her book Reading Jesus, calls this "an impossible question, calling for an impossible honesty." Because yes, she writes: "I am envious because you are generous. I am envious because my work has not been rewarded. I am envious because someone got away with something. Envy has eaten out my heart."

Life is NOT fair. We want transactional love. We've built our lives on it...if we dance a little faster, work a little harder, figure it all out, we'll be loved and do well. That's not what the Gospel says. Nothing you can do or say, will make God love you or me and more or any less. Thank GOD for that. And, just like in last week's lesson, when we REALLY understand that

deeply within our souls, will be more gracious to others who are so different than we are, but all the same brothers and sisters in faith.

There is a church in Tennessee named All Saints. And this is a true story of what happened to this church, when the older, dwindling, hard-working, English-speaking congregation could no longer support the building and was in anguish about closing it.

What happened? A group of desperately poor immigrants from Burma were settled in their town and came to church. They were not the answer to the poor white folks' prayers. They needed a huge amount of support. And they needed the church to change its ways.

What happened was a miracle. Not the magic wand kind we all want. No, the other kind of miracle, the kind Jesus talks about in kingdom parables. Everyone had to work incredibly hard. Set-backs occurred often, and they occurred when people were exhausted.

The future was hard to see, so they had to keep going in faith, when many wanted to stop. And the miracle was not so much what they did, but what happened to them along the way.

In the wake of each set back they grew a little closer, became a little more of a community, lived a little more by faith.

They argued. Yes they did. As Jesus tells us the workers in the kingdom argued, about what was just and fair. So we learn that argument is part of life in the kingdom, it isn't all Kum-bay-yah moments. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/howling-daca-generosity-god/#OhgdTD5J48fKuhaJ.99>

But we also learn that generous the love of God stretches far and wide, lavished upon those whom God calls God's own...all of us!

May it be so! Amen.