

LAST ONE STANDING

the Rev. Beth Hoffman Faeth
Minister for Congregational Care & Worship

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Text: Matthew 20:1–16

How is your sleep? I ask because it seems to be a prominent topic for discussion. During a Zoom meeting earlier this week, every participant commented on how poorly they had been sleeping. I have daily conversations with people I love about their quality of sleep, and the general consensus is that no one seems to be sleeping well. I have developed a new pattern of waking long before I am ready to start the day, especially as darkness still consumes and the world is unbelievably still. It's a deceptively lonely time, because apparently there are many people also struggling to snooze past dawn. Maybe we need to develop supportive groups designed to meet at 4 a.m., just to remind one another of human connection and contact when the night still looms and the worries grow fierce. I know why I can't sleep well. Like so many of you, I am in complete despair about the state of the world and the stark yet sure polarization that divides humanity: a country on fire, a country drowning—literally and figuratively. I struggle to understand how people can view the same issue or concern so wildly differently, how little interest there seems to be in establishing guidelines for goodness, how love gets abused and turned into a weapon, how entitlement and patriotism are lauded as noble—all while under the consuming veil of a pandemic during which the concern of self trumps the care of all. How will we ever breach this great ideological, political, spiritual divide?

I certainly wish my 4 a.m. worrying would produce a great epiphany. I wish this were a sermon full of answers on how to solve this nation's festering fissure as well as create new systems of justice and equality. I know that something needs to give, and it may just be us. Because the one thing I am certain of is that change is imperative for things to be any different at all. So, where do we direct our wearied hearts to glean some hope, some comfort, some vision for our broken-down human spirit? How about to scripture?

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is often interpreted as an understanding of God's extravagant grace. While some worked all day long pulling grapes off the vine and others only for an hour, everyone received the same full-day's pay. Initial reaction to the text might be to call foul and shout "No fair!" because if we are honest we will admit we don't like it when we do not get what we believe we deserve . . . which is the point. God is not *fair*; God is *just*. And God does not dole out rewards based on what we deserve. Thank goodness! Because if we were judged based on what we deserved, the results could be disastrous. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

God is not fair. For reasons we may never know, God seems to love us indiscriminately, and seems also to enjoy reversing the systems we set up to explain why God should love some of us more than others of us. . . . If God is not fair then there is a chance that we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it even though we are last—not because of who we are but because of who God is.¹

¹Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 73–80.

I am a big fan of grace, and much of my theology is rooted in this beautiful concept, described by Paula in last week's sermon as "the undeserved love and mercy of God." We only understand grace and can extend it to others when we ourselves have recognized the grace given to us, Paula said. Grace is liberating and can easily be identified in our parable. When we view the text with this understanding, it could be easy to imply that the landowner represents God. Identifying God in the parables is a common trap: the father welcoming home a prodigal son, the shepherd who searches for one lost sheep out of a flock of 100, the landowner who pays everyone a living wage for the day regardless of the hours clocked and calls out his own generosity in doing so. Many of Jesus' parables are shared to be examples of what the kin-dom of God is to look like. God holds the vision for the kin-dom, but we are the ones to create it. So the characters in the parables are not God . . . they are us. Biblical scholar Stanley Saunders wrote a compelling (and, for some, controversial) commentary on this parable. Saunders writes:

Jesus' parables are meant to get us to think critically about the world we have constructed, free us from our cultural shackles and self-deceptions, and enable us to discern more clearly how God works in the world. Instead of allegory, we should read the story on its own terms, as a straightforward account of the interactions between a landowner and the day laborers who work for him. . . . Why have so many readers in the history of the church wanted to make this landowner into a God-figure? Why do we so often think that the power figures—whether kings, landowners, or fathers—represent divine authority? Is God really like these? Or are they merely god-like in our mind's eye? Why do so many of us still want to believe what the powerful people say, even when it flies in the face of reality? The parable teaches us to read our world critically.²

The reality of this parable is that it could have been written yesterday. Every day, in thousands of parking lots and public squares, people gather to wait to be selected for a day of work. On a pumpkin farm close to my home, a large sign reads, "Field Workers Wanted." These are folks cobbling together a meager living to support spouses and children, often undocumented and living in fear of deportation, itinerant workers dependent on the nod or a finger-point of a landowner or manager identifying them as chosen, selected, employed. The rest are left standing to wait and wonder why they weren't picked and prepare to face another day of scarcity. The waiting continues throughout the day, and this becomes a way of life: that some days you are able to feed your family and some days you are not. It depends on the mercy of one who cares nothing for your story but instead sizes you up quickly to determine how productive you might be in the field. Presbyterian pastor Mark Davis uses the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard to compare the "economics of fairness" to the "economics of need":

In the "economics of fairness" wages are hourly payments, setting human need aside for an objective, fixed measure. . . . The "economics of fairness" gives an aura of blind justice at work through the rule of simple mathematics. The "economics of fairness" is typically calculated according to the correlation between available laborers and scarce jobs, not the actual costs of living. The "economics of need" is based on something other than the medium of a fixed wage per hour. It is created from the workers' needs. That is, it recognizes that someone who is only employed for one hour out of ten still needs to pay 100% of the costs of feeding a family, not just 10% of those costs. That seems to be the landowner's point in the parable. The early morning hires did what they agreed to do and received what they needed. The five o'clock hires did what they agreed to do and received what they needed. The "economics of need" reflects the human-centered and not wage-centered economy, which is what the parable suggests the kin-dom of God is like. Jesus is calling us once again to upset the status quo by demonstrating that the kin-dom of God calls us to a new way of viewing the value of work, by keeping the value of the worker central—even that worker who has picked grapes for one hour instead of twelve.³

²Stanley Saunders, "Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16," *Working Preacher*, September 24, 2017, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4574 (accessed October 2, 2020).

³Mark Davis, "The Politics of Just Wages—Matthew 20:1-16," *Political Theology Network*, September 15, 2014, <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-just-wages-matthew-201-16/> (accessed October 2, 2020).

Professor and author Amy-Jill Levine, in a lecture at the Chautauqua Institute, said this about our parable: “Perhaps the parable helps us redefine our sense of what good life, abundant living, means. We might have thought that the most important thing in life is to be fair, which means to be impartial. But perhaps the more important criterion is to be generous.”⁴

Jesus says—not just at the end of this parable but many other times—that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. And once again, all our perceived understandings about being best and preferred, exceptional and enjoying our privileged place at the head of the line gets overturned. God is absolutely present in this parable, but God is not the landowner. God is the last one standing, the final person waiting to be chosen, the one whom society would deem invisible. God is the homeless woman in a tent encampment, a Black man with a knee on his neck, an elderly person forgotten in a nursing home, a woman living with schizophrenia standing on the corner of Nicollet and Groveland, a migrant worker looking over his shoulder every passing hour. God is the last and the least, tenacious, courageous and, to quote Langston Hughes, “still here.” We are the landowner, given a choice to show extravagant generosity by offering grace and justice. Or not. Because we are also the ones who were chosen first and scream about how unfair it is that someone got more than we think they deserved. The path of grace and justice will close the gap between humanity and God; the path of grace and justice is what makes us beloved community—only when we choose to extend what we have already been given. We bridge the divide.

The gift of being church is that we make this choice between grace and judgment together. We are not alone in determining the path forward. We teach one another through word, thought and deed how to be extravagantly generous, even in the midst of a pandemic, even if we are uncertain of what the future holds, even when the woes of the world keep us awake at night. We are the ones who must demand a living wage for all, who must practice radical hospitality in our church and our homes, who must do the essential work of racial justice, who must stand with the immigrant, who must protect our earth from the horrors of climate change. And while each of these takes a lifetime of engagement, when we practice grace rather than judgment, when we live from a place of love rather than fear, when we choose justice over fairness . . . this is how we dismantle social oppressions; this is how we grow and become changed. In the unsettled hours of pre-dawn, when sleep is fleeting, I join Langston Hughes in dreaming a world “where love will bless the earth and peace its path adorn, where all will know sweet freedom’s way, where all will share the bounties of the earth” . . . and I also know that God’s created vision cannot happen without each one of us. Together. Transformed.

Amen.

⁴Emily Perper, “Levine: Parable of landowner and laborers teaches importance of generosity,” *The Chautauquan Daily*, August 21, 2011, <https://chqdaily.wordpress.com/2011/08/21/levine-parable-of-landowner-and-laborers-teaches-importance-of-generosity/> (accessed October 2, 2020).