

## GOD JUST ISN'T BEING FAIR!

(02/24/19)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 20:1-16

*“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”* (Matthew 20:15)

In the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Jesus provides his listeners with a teaching about the kingdom of heaven.

I believe the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is the central focus of Jesus' message. Jesus did not draw people's attention to himself. He did not ask or expect people to worship him. He constantly pointed past himself to God and to the kingdom of God. He was like a finger pointing to God. Unfortunately, the church (and consequently many Christians) have tended to look at the finger rather than look at where the finger is pointing. In other words, they miss the point. (Get it?)

Jesus tells us how to experience the kingdom of heaven *in this life*. When we do this, we enter into *eternal life*. We experience the “peace that passes all understanding.”

Jesus tells us we need to experience the kingdom of God within ourselves if we are to create the kingdom of God on earth. If we cannot live at peace with ourselves, how can we live at peace with each other? If we as individuals have distorted values, how can we reform a materialistic society? If we do not share through our mission outreach with those who have so much less, how can we overcome the evils of income inequality? We are the primary change agents in our society and in the world. It all begins with us!

Today's parable points us toward the kingdom of heaven. Jesus begins by saying, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” He then shows how their reaction to the landowner's generosity prevents some of the laborers from experiencing the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus tells us that at the end of the day some of the laborers were disgruntled. They complained that the landowner was being unfair. They were jealous of those who received the same pay as they for much less work.

Some people have a grudge against God. If they don't believe in a personal God, they may hold a grudge against “life,” so to speak. These people believe that God (or life itself) has been unfair to them. They feel they have been cheated; they have not received what they believe they deserve.

It is interesting that these people don't usually hold a grudge against God for either creating or allowing a state of affairs that we would regard as manifestly unfair to other people. They don't "grumble" because some children are born with birth defects, some people are afflicted with cancer, and some lose their lives in natural disasters or war. They grumble because they believe *they* have not received a fair shake in life, even when, compared to many other people around the world, they number among the privileged. They have what we might call "feelings of entitlement."

Let's get back to the parable. In the parable, the landowner goes out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. You don't have to be a rocket surgeon to figure out that if the landowner is God, then we are the laborers in the vineyard. We are God's hands in the world. Jesus calls us to incarnate his presence on earth. We are an integral part of God's ongoing creation.

The landowner goes out around six a.m., to hire laborers. He promises these workers a denarius, which is a fair day's wage for their work.

When the landowner goes back to the marketplace at nine a.m., he hires additional workers. It is interesting that he does not promise these workers a set wage; he tells them "I will pay you whatever is right." Since the laborers trust him, they agree to the terms.

The same scenario is repeated at noon, at three o'clock, and at five o'clock. The landowner invites those who are standing idle around the marketplace to work in his vineyard, promising to treat them fairly at the end of the day.

At the end of the day, the landowner tells his steward to pay each of the workers beginning with the ones who came to work last. Whether a worker worked one, three, six, nine, or twelve hours, each receives a denarius, the "usual daily wage."

When the ones who began work at six a.m. see that they receive the same compensation as the other workers, they grumble. They feel they deserve more. They complain that the landowner unfairly treated everyone the same. Because they had worked the entire day, they believe they should have been received more pay.

The landowner tells them that they have not been cheated. They agreed to work for a denarius, and that is what they received. He tells them to take what belongs to them and go. He then confronts them on their feelings of envy. He asks, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? If I want to give everyone the same, it is my right to do so, since it is my money. Are you really angry at me because I am generous?"

In this parable, Jesus is telling us something about the generosity of God. He is also telling us something about ourselves, about certain sets of feelings that will prevent us from experiencing the kingdom of heaven. He tells us that our resentment that people have the same as we or more than we can cut us off from our brothers and sisters and can keep us from experiencing and dwelling within the kingdom of heaven.

This reminds me of something that happened in a large evangelical church, I believe in Cleveland, several years ago. The pastor, who is well-known in evangelical circles, built his church from practically nothing to around 10,000 members. Things were going very well.

Then the pastor had an epiphany, a vision, a revelation. He now believed that God's love for us is so great that everyone is welcomed into God's kingdom when they die. Everyone! Absolutely everyone! This realization filled his heart with joy!

However, when he began to preach this message on Sunday mornings, parishioners began leaving his church. In a single year, membership dropped from 10,000 to about 3,000. When a reporter asked some disaffected parishioners what they found so objectionable in their pastor's preaching, they said that they felt cheated. They felt it wasn't fair that God should welcome Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists and agnostics into his kingdom. Only those who had a correct set of beliefs and were members of the right church should be saved.

One of the parishioners told the reporter that if some beliefs are right, others have to be wrong. If some people are saved, other people have to be damned. Otherwise, there is no special benefit that accrues to "being right." It struck me at the time that these disaffected parishioners should re-read the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

By the way, there were smaller coins in existence at the time that Jesus told this parable, so the landowner *could have* paid each worker on an hourly basis. The point is that he *chose* not to do so. The parable tells us that God gives us not only what we deserve, but more than we deserve! It also tells us something about ourselves.

What does God "owe" us? What do we deserve? Do we deserve health or happiness? Do we deserve comfort or financial security? Is it really unfair when our loved ones become sick and die?

Some of the commandments that were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai address the matter of our relationship with God; some address our relationship with one another; and

some seem to be guidelines meant for our benefit alone. The commandment not to covet falls into the second and third categories.

To covet is the same as to be envious. We not only want something, we resent the person or persons who have what we want. We may be envious of those who have more than we. We also may be envious of those who have the same as we but who didn't earn or deserve it. Perhaps they inherited a lot of money from their parents.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the elder son is jealous of his younger brother. He objects to his father's celebration of his brother's return, when he has been a model son from the beginning. The father's response is the same as that of the landowner: "You will receive what is yours, what is fair. Why, then, do you begrudge my generosity?"

It seems to me that envy arises from what is called "zero-sum thinking." In zero-sum thinking, what goes in equals what goes out. The credits and debits add up to zero.

Zero-sum thinking is characteristic of situations where there are limited resources. For example, in the story of Hansel and Gretel, there is not enough food to go around. The stepmother prevails upon the children's father to send the children away so there will be more food for them. The children, of course, find abundance in the forest.

Our church knows something about zero-sum budgets. We have a limited amount of money available to us through our pledges and other fund-raising activities. If the price of oil goes up, we will have less money available for a new water heater and a new stove to replace the cast iron monstrosity that just found itself a new home. In zero-sum thinking, you often have to "rob Peter to pay Paul." I like that quote! I don't know who Peter is, but as long as you pay Paul, I am happy!

Zero-sum thinking applies to time. There is only so much time in a day, in a week, in a year. If we spend our time in one place, we cannot spend it in another. If I spend more time at work, I will have less time to spend with my family. I will have more money to provide for them, but less time to actually *be* with them. Life is full of difficult choices, choices that need to be guided by our values.

However, zero-sum thinking can pervade certain areas of life where it doesn't really apply. Some people say, "If I give to charity, there will be less money for me." Some churches take this position with regard to missions. They say, "Charity begins at home. We will give what is left over at the end of the year to missions." The problem is that there is seldom anything left over. When we fail to respond to the needs of others

because of our desire to live at a level that would be regarded by most of the world as privileged if not extravagant, something really bad happens to our soul.

Advocates of moral capitalism believe that businesses have an obligation to give back to the community. Their focus should be on more than returning a profit to their shareholders. This economic view maintains that when we raise the standard of living around the world, which we can do by eliminating malaria, poverty, and malnutrition, we create a future market for our products. This kind of investment in the world is different from zero-sum or bottom-line thinking.

Zero-sum thinking is characteristic of closed systems with limited resources. But what if we are operating within an open system? What if the universe itself is an open system? Take the example of love. When we reach out in love to others, we discover that it comes back to us many times over. It doesn't make sense, but it happens! Jesus tells us that the more we give away, the richer we become!

Jesus tells us that God is not a zero-sum God. The father of the prodigal son loves his younger son, but he also loves his elder son. He does not have a limited amount of love to share between them. He is happy that the elder son never strayed from the path, and he is happy that the younger son strayed and then returned. He tells the elder son, "I have always loved you. All that I have is yours. But shouldn't we be happy that your brother, who was lost, has been found?"

God takes care of all those who work in his vineyard. As an act of grace, he gives something totally undeserved to those who come at the last hour. When the thief on the cross repents only a few moments before his death, Jesus says, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

When we compare what we have with others, when we compare our life with theirs, we release a poison--the poison of jealousy, envy, and resentment. These feelings will probably have little effect upon the person we resent, but they will have a profound effect upon us. They will keep us from experiencing the kingdom of heaven within us.

If we can overcome the delusion of duality, if we can feel our deep connection, our identity with our brothers and sisters, we will rejoice at their good fortune and our heart will go out to them when they experience misfortune. When we compare, we lose. When we compare ourselves with those who have more, we will feel envy. When we

compare ourselves with those who have less, we will feel pride. Both of these feelings will keep us from experiencing the kingdom of heaven and helping to create it on earth.

Someone asked a blind man what he knew about a certain Zen master. The blind man said that he listened carefully to people's voices. He discovered that when most people discuss someone's good fortune, there is a touch of envy in their voice. When they discuss someone's misfortune, there is a touch of happiness that the misfortune fell to the person and not to them. When he heard this Zen master speak, he never heard the slightest hint of envy or of pride. When he spoke of someone's good fortune, his voice showed that he was truly happy. When he discussed someone's misfortune, his voice showed that he was truly sad. What a wonderful testimonial to the master's character!

God has given us so much. All that we have is from God. We have this life and all the experiences that are such a beautiful part of this life not because we deserve it, but because God freely chooses to give it. We should be so much more grateful than we are. And we should not begrudge good fortune when it falls to others.

Life is about making the most of what is given to us. If we do this, we bring a spark of light to our soul and to the world. We can do this in a humble cottage or a mansion. We can do this in a little church or in a crystal cathedral. What is important is that we take this day, with its joys and its sorrows, and live it to the fullest. When we do this, we are not only creating the kingdom of heaven within, we are also helping to create it in the world.

Let's not be like the first set of workers. Let's be grateful for the rewards that come to us for working in God's vineyard. And let's be genuinely happy when our brothers and sisters all around the world are embraced by God, when they also are touched by the mystery of grace!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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