

“Going Deeper: Why God's economy is so different (and better) than ours”

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Over the years I've talked with a lot of young people growing into adulthood and one of the questions I've been asked is: “when did you realize that you were an official adult?” It's a good question, right? Was it when you reached a certain age, moved out on your own, or perhaps when you became financially independent?

For me, the moment I realized that I was an official adult was when I started saying things to myself that my parents used to say to me when I was growing up. All the parent-isms and different sayings I heard as a boy, I realized I was an adult when I started saying them to myself in the midst of various life circumstances. And the moment I realized I was a parent was when I started saying these things out loud to my kids.

This happened to me a little while back at preschool pick up here in our courtyard. See at preschool pick-up there is this ritual with my daughter and her friends; they all congregate in the courtyard and share snacks with one another. On a typical afternoon it is a beautiful sight to witness, all these preschoolers bursting with excitement to share whatever snack they happen to have. The generosity of these kids is inspiring and reminds me that Jesus was on to something when he said let the children come to me because it is to such as them that the kingdom of God belongs. The overflowing love for friends leads them to share their snacks so freely and generously, **well at least most of the time.**

Sometimes, one of the friends will have the mother of all snacks, some sort of chocolatey, sugary, caramelly, cracker or cookie goodness that's just too much for the group to handle. This happened once a little while back and the child who was sharing did their best to make sure that everyone, and I really mean everyone, got at least a little bit. But, the problem was that it was such a good snack that everyone wanted more, another bite, a second taste.

In the midst of it all there were some tears and whinnying; “it's not fair because I only got a little bit but I wanted more.” And then it happened, I heard my parents' voice through my own mouth, well guess what, LIFE ISN'T FAIR.

Which brings us to our text today, the gospel, the good news of God's love made known through the life, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus. We are in the fourth week of our sermon series, Faith for a Time Such as this, where we are exploring how living in the way of Jesus calls us to be countercultural agents of grace, forgiveness and generosity in the midst of our world which often holds conflicting values.

We are exploring all the ways that God's call in Christ leads us to live differently in this world. From your inter-personal relationships to how you spend your money, from how you raise your kids to how you treat strangers, from what you eat to how you vote.

The point of this whole following Jesus thing is to allow God's subversive, all-encompassing, unconditional love to seep into every aspect and compartment of our life, to heal our brokenness, to reorient our views and to find a meaning and purpose beyond the human and the material. In other words, to experience the resurrection, pure unbounded love, in the very core of our being and to live that love in and for this hurting world.

Our text for today is a parable which offers us a different vision for being in this world and being in human community. It is a difficult and challenging text because it defies the way we often think that the world works.

Let's unpack the text a little bit. So Jesus frames this vision of a different world through the lens of a parable. Just in case you are new to Christianity and Jesus or perhaps you forgot or just aren't sure, a parable is a story which invites us to see the world through God's radical life-changing grace. It's not a story that is supposed to give us a simple moral, like a fairy tale or a fable which we could sum up in one sentence.

A parable isn't about trying to find the underlying moral lesson, it's about letting the story transform your underlying notion of how the world is supposed to work. It gives us a glimpse or glance into the kingdom of God; these moments of grace and unbelievable love in this life, moments of beauty and wonder when we feel a part of something bigger and larger than us alone, moments when the world is falling apart around us and everything seems to be caving in and we are touched by a mercy and a peace that isn't of our own

making and we feel an interconnectedness that loves us back to life and make us whole. That's what the kingdom of God is, that's what Jesus is talking about, something we can taste, feel, live into within our very heart, when we are fully alive.

Jesus invites us to see the world through new eyes, through his eyes as we hear this parable of a landowner and some day laborers. The story goes that the landowner needed some help in his vineyard. So the landowner goes in the morning and hires some help for the day.

But at midday, the landowner realized that he needed some more help so he comes back to the workers who are still waiting around for employment and hires a second round of laborers. The land owner comes back at 3pm and hires some more people and then again at 5.

At quitting time, the landowner decides to have everyone line up in reverse chronological order, with the last to be hired in the front of the line and the first to be hired at the end of the line. He then proceeds to give a typical days wage to everyone in the line. All received the same rate even despite being hired at different times of the day. It was totally equal and all agreed upon, but the workers who worked the longest day begin to grumble, to complain to the landowner:

Hey now, hey now, they didn't work as long as us, as hard as us, they didn't work through the heat of the day, why do they get the same as me? It isn't fair!

Now I want to say that this reaction seems to be a very normal and human response to this situation. It is probably the way that I would have responded if I were aching from a hard day's work, probably a little bit hangry, hungry with a little anger mixed in, which I'm told I'm prone to. It seems like in these moments when I'm a little bit raw, exhausted and worn down, it seems way easier for me to give into the temptation to judge, compare, to keep score and I somehow notice all the ways I've been shortchanged.

Getting back to the parable, it seems like there's something that Jesus is saying between the lines which may be lost at first listen. If you put yourself in the shoes of the landowner, who is the first group that you are going to hire to help with the work for the day? Probably those who are the strongest and most fit for the work, right?

And of course when you go back later, you probably hire the next strongest group of workers, and on and on and on until you get to the end of the day and you are probably hiring the weakest, the most vulnerable; those who are most in need.

It's the working poor, those who have to work long days into the latter years of their life, it's the ones who are struggling to get by and can't just give up midday looking for work because their need is just too great. It's the single mom working three jobs to get by, the man who drives for Uber on weekends to make the rent, the woman who can't ever afford to retire.

The landowner hires these folks last and then chooses to have the weakest, the most vulnerable and the ones with the greatest need to receive first, to be at the front of the line.

This of course irritates those of us who would have been the grumblers, the complainers, the: this isn't fairers. I love this exchange at the end of the parable when the landowner, in response to all of us whiners, says: "take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to the last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose, with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first and the first will be last."

I love that question, are you envious because I am generous? The literal Greek translation is: "is your eye evil because of my generosity?" See in Jesus' time the eye was seen as the window into the soul, your spiritual life, your inner world, your heart. If there was something wrong with your eye then there was something wrong with your soul, something wrong with your spirit. Is your eye evil? Is your seeing distorted because of your envy? Are you missing the point, the bigger picture, the larger love at work here because your eye is polluted with your own stuff? Is your jealousy, is your coveting of what the other person is getting eating you up inside? If you're like me then the answer is probably yes.

There are smaller parts of us that want what everyone else has or thinks that we deserve more than others because we worked harder or longer or better or more intelligently. The smaller parts of us see these extravagant moments of generosity where someone receives more than we think they should or they luck out and get everything we long for and instead of being excited, or celebrating or responding with love, we just want to cry out that it's not fair, where's mine, why not me, why don't I deserve more, more, more. And I don't know about you but when I go down this rabbit hole of thinking I usually just end up bitter, angry, jealous and disconnected.

Because I've missed the whole point of it all, my eye is polluted with evil and I can't see the truth: that all of it is a gift, all of it is a gift of God's grace. When the vulnerable are the first in line our hearts should sing with joy, when the weak among us receive generosity we should celebrate and be filled with gratitude because there are or will be times when we too are weak, vulnerable and in need. Times when things don't go our way, there are times when we are waiting around all day longing to find our purpose, times when it feels like our hope is fading as day turns into night. There are times when we will be last, and if you've always been first, man that's a tough pill to swallow, but there will be a time when things don't work and you recognize your powerlessness in this world.

It's in these moments when God's generous and indiscriminate grace seems like foolishness to the world, because those moments when you are a hot mess and your life is shattered into a thousand pieces, those are the moments when God is picking up the pieces re-forming you in God's sacred image and making you whole.

The key to this spiritual life is to remember this when things are going well, when you've got the place of privilege, when you're pushing your way to the front of the line, remember that we follow the one who though rich became poor for our sake, we follow the one who though God became flesh and bone and made his home among us, full of grace and truth entering into the suffering of others offering compassion, healing and hope and he calls us to do the same. Amen.

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