

“God’s Economy”

Matthew 20:1-16

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Our attention is drawn this morning to one of the most intriguing parables Jesus told. Jesus used stories, commonly referred to as parables, to make people think and reflect upon their lives and faith. His parables had a way of sticking with people and interrupting them throughout the day, as all good stories do.

I am confident this parable hung around for a long time and became the topic of many conversations. Listen as I tell it.

A landowner went to the marketplace early one morning to hire people to work in his vineyards, an event which commonly occurred in that culture. Day laborers would arrive at sunup with tools in hand eager to be chosen to work.

The survival of their families depended upon them being selected for work each day. The money they would be paid at the end of the day would be used to buy food on their way home that evening. Without that job, the likelihood of a family having little or nothing to eat was very high.

This landowner made several people happy that morning when he selected them to work in his vineyards. He offered to pay them the going rate for a day laborer, one denarius, and they accepted his offer.

At nine o’clock in the morning, the landowner returned to the marketplace to get more workers. No money was mentioned during this transaction, but the landowner assured the laborers he would do what was right. This was good enough for them, and they headed to his vineyards just as the earlier workers had done.

Surprisingly, the landowner returned to the marketplace again at noon, three o’clock and five o’clock, which was just one hour before the workday would conclude. Each time, he hired more workers and took them to his vineyards.

At the end of the work day, the landowner instructed his manager to pay the workers, beginning with those who arrived last. It is at this point in this story that 'it explodes with surprise', a phrase I heard Dr. John Claypool use. Each worker received the same amount of pay, regardless of how many hours he worked!

As you would expect, those who had worked a partial day were elated, but those who had been chosen first and worked the longest were quite upset. They assumed they would be paid more because they had worked longer, and they voiced their disappointment.

"Those who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun," they blurted out to the landowner.

Immediately, the landowner replied, "Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give this one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have a right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Are you resentful because I am generous? So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last." (Matthew 20:12-16)

I think you can see why this parable created a buzz among the crowd that day. It had as many twists and turns as a mountain road. Many people had to be shaking their heads as they listened to Jesus, especially those who owned businesses.

You may be having the same reaction. What point was Jesus making and what message was Matthew, the only gospel writer to include this parable, sending his readers? Let's answer these questions by asking a few more.

Why did the owner of the vineyard return to the marketplace throughout the day to hire more workers? Perhaps it was late in September, and there was no time to waste. The fall rains would soon arrive, and grapes left on the vines would spoil.

Even if this was true, I don't think the landowner's profit was his primary motivation. Look at the conversation he had at five o'clock with the unemployed workers back in the marketplace.

"About the eleventh hour, he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has

hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard'." (Matthew 20:6-7)

Why did the landowner send these men to his vineyard for just one hour? Could they really make that much difference in harvesting the grapes? I doubt it.

However, the landowner knew one hour of work could make a difference in their lives. Instead of going home with no food for the evening meal or breakfast the next morning, they would be able to provide for their families.

When the landowner returned to the marketplace at five o'clock, he knew why these laborers were still there. They were desperate and just a day's work from being hungry.

The landowner saw more than those men that day. He saw a wife and children anxiously looking for their husband and father at the end of the day to see if he was carrying any food in his hands along with his tools. Their disappointment if he was not carrying food was more than this landowner could bear. So, he hired them, all of them, for one hour and mercifully paid them what they would need to provide for their families.

Before we move on, I do not want you to miss an important element in this story. It is the landowner's involvement in this process. Normally, a landowner would send a project manager to the marketplace to hire workers for the day. Rarely, if ever, did a large landowner go hire day laborers, and they certainly did not keep returning like this man did.

His engagement with the community and concern for his neighbors should not be taken for granted or overlooked. They are crucial to understanding this parable.

Even if the landowner's compassion led him to hire more people late in the day, why did he pay them the same amount as those who had worked all day? Was this fair? Was this a good precedent to set?

He did it because he could. He owned this vineyard. He could do whatever he wanted, and what he wanted to do was to make sure everyone had enough food to feed his family. This meant each person had to go home with at least a full day's wages.

It is obvious he was not willing to build his fortune on the sufferings of other people. He wanted to be an agent of mercy. People were more important to him than profits.

This is not to say profits were unimportant to him. He could not sustain his business and hire anyone if he did not make money.

At some point in his life, however, he became aware of the devastating effects of poverty. It must have become apparent to him that poverty was at the root of many of his community's problems. An honorable job lifted his neighbors' self-esteem and made it possible for them to provide for their families.

Therefore, putting people to work and sharing his resources with them strengthened his community. He may have had to make sacrifices in order to be this benevolent, but evidently he felt it was his responsibility to make these sacrifices, so he did.

Why, though, at the end of the day did the landowner pay the people who worked the least number of hours first? He had to know those who worked longer would be upset because everyone received the same pay.

Wouldn't it be smarter to pay those who worked the longest first and to send them on their way? Chances are they would not have known everyone was paid an equal amount, and the landowner could have saved himself a lot of grief.

I am confident the landowner thought of this, which means he deliberately chose this method of payment. Why?

It appears to me he wanted to teach all those who worked for him that day what it means to be a good neighbor. Based upon the angry responses he received from those who worked the longest, they needed to learn this lesson.

Their eyes were focused squarely on themselves and what they expected. They neither saw nor appeared to care about anyone else.

What did the landowner want them to know before they left the vineyard for the day? Making sure there was food in every home each night, including theirs, was more important to him than having extra money in his pocket. Doing his part to build a safe and prosperous community meant being sensitive to others' needs and extravagantly generous. If he had to live with less so others could merely live, he would do it, and he did.

So must they. Everybody who worked for him needed to be the kind of neighbor he was: engaged, responsible, compassionate and generous. They might not be able to do as much as

he did that day, but they could do something every day to make their village a safer and better place for everyone who lived there.

Why do you think Jesus told this parable? I am confident Jesus had many reasons and several audiences in mind when he told it, including his own disciples. Perhaps his disciples had adopted this “what’s in it for me” attitude and had begun ignoring the needs of others.

Read the passage that leads up to this parable, the one where Peter said to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” (Matthew 19:27)

Peter sounded a lot like the early workers in this parable after the landowner had been so gracious to the late workers, and Jesus called him out on it. Jesus wanted Peter to know anyone who was jealous, insensitive, unmerciful, hard-hearted, ungrateful, selfish and stingy did not reflect the heart and nature of God and was not doing his or her part to build healthy, safe, prosperous communities.

These were not the characteristics of someone who was his brother’s keeper and a good neighbor. They were certainly not traits that should show up in the lives of Jesus’ followers.

Jesus wanted Peter to get rid of this ‘what’s in it for me attitude’. He knew the only way this would happen was for Peter to adopt the merciful and generous heart of God, much like the landowner in this parable.

I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon that Jesus enjoyed telling parables. This is evident by the number he told.

If he were here today and could share just one of his many parables, I wonder which one he would choose. **If he looked into your heart and mine, and he examined our attitudes and lifestyles, would it be this one?**