

Sermon – September 24, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

Matthew 20:1-16

This really is one of my favorite Jesus-parables. For me it's up there with "The Good Samaritan" and "The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin."

One of the things I love about it is how clearly it showcases just how *different* God's perspective is from *ours*. Another is how *timeless* it is—the story beats of Jesus' lesson from our reading this morning come across exactly how they would have to the people hearing it for the first time 2,000 years ago. *Most* of the time we have to do at least a *little* context-shifting to hear the words of the Bible with the same ears as its original audience... but not this time. 2,000 years later, we the readers of this parable feel exactly the emotions Jesus *wanted* his *listeners* to feel on Day *One*... which means the *lessons* of this story should be just as accessible to *us* as they were to Jesus' own disciples.

All of that is to say that if you *bristled* at any point in this story, if you started to feel secondhand jealousy, defensiveness, *confusion*... that's exactly what Jesus *wanted* you to feel. That's how Jesus' parables usually work: he sets us up... and knocks us down.

There's a format he uses a lot in the Gospels: "you have heard it said that..." "but *I* say..." It's a way to *recognize* the human perspective, and then *highlight* just how revolutionary, how transformative the *divine* perspective is in contrast. "We see through a glass darkly." "What we know is a drop; what we don't know is an ocean." "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

So what of *Christ's* philosophy are we meant to see through this parable? What are we meant to learn about heaven and earth from this story about wages and work?

What I see? I see that human instinct and heavenly attitude are two very different things. I see that the kingdom of heaven is very different than the kingdom of earth that we humans have been building these last 2,000 years. And I see Jesus trying to help us *start* to bridge that gap, by teaching us... to shift our perspective.

Our job as Christians, in response to this parable and others like it and *all* the times the Divine might make us uncomfortable... is to strive to shift our perspective away from the human ruts we're in... toward something a little more heavenly. A God's-eye-view, if you will.

The story itself is simple. The people are asking Jesus all kinds of questions. What is good? What is righteous? What is the kingdom of heaven, and how can we inherit it? The questions go on and on, and Jesus answers them in many different ways. *This* time, in Matthew 20, Jesus answers with a parable.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” The landowner goes to the marketplace, and agrees to pay some laborers “the usual daily wage,” and they head to the vineyard to work. A few hours later, he sees a few *others* looking for work. “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” And off they go. Remember how he said that: “I will pay you whatever is right.”

Nine, noon, and three he goes out, and he picks up *more* workers and sends them to the vineyard. And at *five* o’clock, he comes across laborers that no one has hired all day long. These are a subsistence people—if there were no jobs for *them* that means they didn’t have any money for *lunch*, and they couldn’t even go *get* lunch for fear of missing a job opportunity. So *these* folks—come five o’clock—are hungry and desperate.

And the landowner, he does the same thing again. You’re *hired*; get to the vineyard, we’re burnin’ daylight. So back at the vineyard, there have been people working from early in the morning, from midday, from late afternoon and everything in between, all there in the same field. Until finally... the Fred Flinstone whistle blows end-of-shift, and the workers are summoned to receive their wages.

Now here’s where Jesus’ story *diverges* from... a story you or I might tell our *kids* when we’re trying to teach them about how the world works. The *human* version of the story might end something like this: those who worked for an hour received an hour’s wage. Those who worked two, received two, and those who were hired at first light got a full day’s pay. That’s the *human* version of this parable, and hell it makes sense, right? Well, it makes sense to *us*. But we’re not God, and Jesus loves a curveball.

The *Divine* version of the story ends like this: The people hired last, at five o’clock were given a full day’s wage by the landowner. So naturally, the people hired early in the morning, who had been working hard all day, figured that meant the pay-scale had been adjusted, and they were about to receive far more than the day’s pay they’d agreed on.

But instead, they received exactly what all the rest of the laborers were given; no more, no less.

And it’s at this point we start to get uncomfortable, right? These early-morning laborers are getting cheated. Or, worse, the five o’clock freeloaders are stealing their hard-earned cash.

And at this point that’s what Jesus *wants* you to feel. Because that’s the *human* response. We feel the human response, so that Jesus can emphasize just how *different* the divine perspective is.

And if we can *recognize* that, well, that’s the first step toward aligning our *minds* a little closer to *God’s*.

“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.’” How human is *that*? Their perspective—as would be our own in *their* shoes—is that of someone wronged. Wronged by the landowner, and wronged by their fellow laborers. It’s the zero-sum game that is the human experience. One person’s gain is another person’s loss. That’s just how it works.

These 1st Century laborers’ feelings sound *familiar* to us, even here in the Year of our Lord 2023.

But the thing is, the landowner in Jesus’ story didn’t *underpay* anyone. It just *feels* like that from the *human* perspective. From the perspective of someone who labored hard under the hot sun all day, seeing laborers who only worked an hour get the same wage *feels* like... theft. Or some kind of “Communist” redistribution of wealth.

But Jesus uses the final lines of the parable to force a shift in perspective... to try to get the *laborer* to see it through the eyes of the *landowner*. To get the humans hearing this story—you and me—to see it from a God’s-eye-view.

From the *landowner’s* perspective, nobody’s being stolen from. Quite the opposite in fact. The landowner is giving the early birds *exactly* the wages they both agreed upon. The “usual daily wage.” An honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay; it’s what we *all* want. From the landowner’s *perspective*, all he’s *doing* by paying the people who worked *one* hour the same *amount* as the *daily* wage... is being *generous*.

No one’s being cheated, the early birds aren’t being stolen from *or* swindled... it’s just... *that* day, the landowner felt like what he wanted to do—with his own money—was pay those hired later in the day... a full day’s wage.

“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?”

That’s the perspective of the landowner.

And what does that say about the perspective of God? Well, *one* of the lessons of the parable... is those who find God the *long* way around will find the same place at God’s side as those who have served God their whole lives... which is really good news for most of us, myself included. And in fact, when we find our heavenly reward, it’s those who have served God faithfully the *longest* who will be at the *back* of the line... ‘cause they can wait. It’s the late-bloomers God wants to give extra care and attention, and isn’t that God’s right?

Another lesson of this parable... is that in the kingdom of God, everyone has an opportunity to serve in their own way... and God's *generosity* ensures that all will have what they need to *flourish*.

"You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." From God's perspective, the landowner was not only generous... the landowner was *right*. And if we can begin to shift our perspective from the natural human response to this parable to that *divine* response, if we can begin to understand why it was important to Jesus that the landowner did what he did... well a shift in perspective like that can start to change everything.

Because to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven wasn't some unattainable thing that you *only* get to when you die. To Jesus, the kingdom of heaven was *imminent*. It was to come, one day soon. Sure, life everlasting in the arms of God's peace and generosity, that waits for *all* of us at the end of our lives. But to Jesus it wasn't supposed to *always* be apples and oranges: Earth and Heaven, human and divine.

"On earth as it is in heaven." That's the prayer Jesus taught us.

And I believe that all the times Jesus was striving to get us to shift from the *earth* perspective to the *heaven* perspective... a part of what he was doing was trying to get us to start bringing heaven to earth. To make God's kingdom *our* kingdom. To begin to live with the attitude of generosity that the *landowner* did. And to *benefit* from it in turn. To free ourselves from the grumbling and in-fighting of those laborers, to *serve* joyfully, and to celebrate the blessings of others. And God-willing, to *build* for each *other* a world where this parable makes *sense*.

It's been 2,000 years and the world's perspective doesn't seem to have shifted much yet... Maybe it starts with you. Amen.