

Envyng Generosity

A Reflection for Morning Worship on the Star Words: *Generosity & Service*

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, January 30, 2022

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

This morning's text, known as "The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard," has always been controversial from the first moment Jesus taught it to the disciples and others 2000 years ago. The thing is, Jesus knew it would be controversial and that very controversy is what he wanted to provoke. He wanted people to read this parable, hear this parable, and be provoked to respond, to think, to act as a result. This parable, which draws a stark line connecting an economic structure based solely on merit – or what one does to earn one's way – and the injustice inherent in that system. And, in typical Jesus fashion, he turns everything upside down to make his point.

Scholars have disagreed about the lesson this parable is illustrating for as long as biblical scholarship has been a thing. In other words, since shortly after Jesus died on the cross. Yes, he was resurrected but he soon moved on to heaven and his disciples were left behind to figure everything out without him there to explain. That this parable is recorded as it is in Matthew tells us it is one which made an impression on those who heard it. It was discussed and debated and dissected so much that it got included in Matthew's summary of Jesus' life and teachings thereby being codified into the canon of Scripture. Since it was in the canon it couldn't be ignored. And with its emphasis on justice for the average working person and generosity from the wealthy landowner, we can imagine the early church fathers faced quite a conundrum as they debated how to address the "problem" this parable presented. And present a problem it did. How were they

supposed to preach on, teach a parable that clearly said that how much one worked didn't matter when it came to getting paid at the end of the day. Nobody liked that lesson! Not the power structure of the Roman empire or the empires which followed it. Not the feudal landlords of the middle ages. Not even the "enlightened" folks of the Renaissance liked this lesson that basically said that everyone was deserving of having their needs met. So, what was the church to do? Hmmm...

Aha! Problem solved! We teach that this parable is purely allegorical! The landowner, well obviously he represents God. The workers starting to labor at different times in the day, obviously they are the people, the peasants if you will, who find their way to salvation through the church at different points in life. Yet, miracle of miracles, whenever they come to faith and accept their salvation from the Messiah, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, they are still saved from sin and granted access into heaven! Yay! This parable isn't about economic justice and generosity! It's only about getting into heaven and how God accepts folks regardless of when in life they come to salvation.

Well, maybe. I mean it does start with the standard introduction of "The kingdom of heaven is like..." so clearly it is about heaven in some way. But, it just seems a little too easy, a little too convenient to interpret this text as purely allegorical. Especially since Jesus would have known his audience would not have been sophisticated enough to hear the parable as an allegory. And the allegorical interpretation certainly makes the very last verse of the parable even more confusing than it already is: "So the last will be first and the first will be last." Did Jesus really intend us to think this only referred to our place in line for the pearly gates? That only makes sense if we think the phrase "the kingdom of heaven" refers exclusively to the place we go to after death.

And that, dear friends, is not what Jesus meant at all. Jesus makes clear throughout Matthew as well as Mark and Luke that the kingdom of God is not some faraway gilded place we go to after death, if we have been officially “saved.” Nope, Jesus intended for the people to see the kingdom of God was in the here and now, in everyday life and all the struggles and problems we encounter every day. That’s exactly why so many of Jesus’ so-called “kingdom” parables begin as they do – “the kingdom of heaven is like” – so the people can see the kingdom is all around them, if only they have the faith to see it and become part of it.

So, if we approach this parable from this perspective, it makes perfect sense to take this parable at face value – the landowner is a landowner who needs to hire some laborers. Presumably there is a lot of work to be done so he keeps going back to the marketplace to look for workers. He bargains with the first group he hires early in the morning on what the daily wage will be and they agree to mutually acceptable terms. This is one key to understanding the parable. The landowner and the first workers agree together on what would be a reasonable wage. The landowner hires three additional rounds of laborers, at noon, 3pm and 5pm without renegotiating the wages. Then, at the end of the day, he pays them all the same, regardless of how long they had worked. And that’s when the troubles begin. Those hired first complained that those hired last didn’t do the same amount of work so they weren’t entitled to the same amount of pay. And how does the landowner answer them? He reminds them he paid them the price they agreed upon before they began to work so they have nothing to complain about. Then he asks them two very pointed questions: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Are you envious because I am generous? Now there's a question for you! Dear ones, this question replaces the concept of compensation being earned with the idea that compensation based on need is just as relevant to the well-being of society. This very same debate still rages today just as it did when Jesus posed it to his listeners two millennia ago. Because human nature is human nature. The people whose needs are met because of their own hard work –or as is common among the uber-wealthy who inherited their wealth from hard-working previous generations – think the only way one should have ones needs met is to work hard to meet them. This is a merit-based economic system and it's the one we are most familiar with because it's the one we've lived with all our lives. It is deeply entrenched in the way we think about so many things most especially about poverty and the working poor.

One of the commentaries I read on this text posed many thoughtful ideas on this very conundrum. This biblical scholar, D. Mark Davis, writes a biblical commentary blog entitled "Left Behind and Loving It." What I enjoy so much about this blog is that he goes back to the original Greek text and does a deep dive on the translation. In other words, he does not rely on how others have translated the text in the past and he works at approaching the text without bias. He just deeply explores the translation and, in the case of this morning's parable, he raises some very interesting points that reveal a radical new understanding of this parable. For one, he sees the phrase "having bargained" describing the original interaction between the landowner and the first set of workers as critical. Those hired first set the price and the landowner honored it for everyone hired. In other words, the landowner ensured economic justice for the workers when he gave them the power to set their own wages. Second, Davis takes great exception to most translations which described those hired in the

marketplace at the end of the day as having been “standing idle” in the marketplace. He believes that this translation implies the workers hired last could have been working all day and chose not to, which is not what the text is really saying. All it says is that they were available for hire at the end of the day. Given the way these day labor markets worked in Jesus’ time, and the way they still work today, it is just as likely that these hired last had already worked a full day at another job and were looking for additional work. This is an excellent example of how just one word – in this case “idle” – can completely change how the entire parable is viewed. In his translation of this phrase, Davis describes these laborers hired last as simply “unemployed workers” which is what they were. The indolence and laziness implied in the traditional translation of “idle” is gone. That this is therefore a parable about the difference between fairness and justice becomes clearer.

One of the other commentaries I read would agree with the notion that this parable is about the difference between fairness and justice, but he sees those two concepts in an entirely different way than Davis. Stanley Saunders, writing an essay for a blog called *Working Preacher.org* claims the real injustice here is the landlord’s actions. He sees the landlord as really making a play to be seen as an overly generous landowner exercising his whims over the workforce. If the landlord was truly seeking justice, Saunders claims, and thought paying the last workers hired the same as the first workers, he would have just done it without making such a big deal about it. There would have been no argument among the workers and everyone goes happy and justice is served without the notion of fairness even being raised. I confess I had to read this commentary about five times before I could grasp that this was truly Saunder’s point. He accuses the landowner of what he calls “false justice” because it “produces envy and division

rather than wholeness and healed relationships.” Wow. That interpretation took some real effort to create. So, according to Saunders, the real problem in this story is the landowner. So, how does that answer the questions posed in the original text, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” All due respect, I think Saunders is just plain wrong here.

But, Saunders’ exegesis (his interpretation of the text as a scholar) of this parable goes a long way to explain the utter confusion of so many in this time of Covid who don’t understand why there are just not enough workers to do the work in every sector of the economy that needs doing. We all know, everyone from housekeepers and CNA’s to cooks and servers and bartenders to pharmacy techs and retail clerks to teachers and nurses are taking giant steps back and saying – “Hey, wait a minute! Why I am I doing all this work, taking all this risk, for lousy pay and the privilege of having people being rude and mean to me all day long? Why are people who have never tried to live on what I am paid telling me I am greedy for wanting to earn enough to have my family’s needs met? Why are my skills doing work that clearly everyone relies on not worthy of compensation that reflects how critical my role is in the economy?”

Dear friends, make no mistake this parable is definitely about justice and fairness, but not in the way we usually think. This parable Jesus himself taught is quite clear that economic justice for some may feel like unfairness to others who have benefited from the system as it was and has always been. Interesting to note is that those benefitting from the system are the landlord and the laborers hired first. The laborers hired first are not the ones wanting to solve the problem. The landowner is, because he knows the wealth resides with him. It is the

laborers hired first, the ones who worked all day in the hot sun, who feel paying those who didn't work in the same way the same wages as they earned as fair. Yes, clearly this dynamic goes against everything we, like those laborers hired first, have been taught to think is economic fairness. But our thoughts and reactions do not change Jesus' point in this parable which he sums up himself at the end: "So the last will be first and the first will be last." That, dear ones, is a bitter point for us to swallow when we're talking about our own sense of fairness. But it is exactly what Jesus is asking us to do. We are to be generous with our time and our own personal abundance. And we are to view our work, whatever it is, as not ours alone dedicated to securing our own personal financial well-being. Instead, Jesus invites us to view our own labor as service to the greater good. Jesus invites us to see that bargaining over what constitutes a reasonable wage for work done is also an act of generosity, as well as the foundation for fairness and justice as Jesus defines it.

I read a third commentary about this text which I really liked and which could be the basis of an entirely different sermon on this same text which I am not prepared to offer at this time. That wouldn't be fair. 😊 But she does offer a powerful visual which explains this parable more eloquently than words ever could. It's actually a related activity she describes for children and youth that she calls "reverse musical chairs." In this version of the simple game, you start with one chair and as many people as want to play. Then, the music starts as usual and everyone walks around the one chair. But, when the music starts, you add a chair and now two people can sit down. This continues, adding chairs, until everyone has a seat and the game is over. Wow. Everyone has a seat at the end of the game. Everyone wins. What a concept. I admit, if we were in the sanctuary, I would

have ended this sermon with a rousing game of reverse musical chairs. But we're not in the sanctuary, are we. I guess we'll just have to find another way to make being fair and just, generosity and service, easier to understand. What are your ideas?? I'm all ears! Amen.

Sources:

Bleazard, Sharron R., "The Problem with Generosity," *Stewardship of Life Institute*, Sept. 21, 2014, <https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2014/09/the-problem-with-generosity/>

Davis, D. Mark, "Fairness v. Justice," *Left Behind and Loving It*, Sept. 13, 2020 <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2017/09/fairness-v-justice.html>

Saunders, Stanley, "Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16," *workingpreacher.org*, Sept. 24, 2017 <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25/commentary-on-matthew-201-16-5>