

“The Laborers in the Vineyard”

Date: August 18, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Short Stories by Jesus, series

Theme: Justice

Texts: Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Matthew 20:1-16

Growing up in America, we have been taught to work hard for everything you get. It's a very private, individualistic orientation that says you are responsible for your own destiny. Work hard and you'll get ahead of others. That seems to be the goal – to create a hierarchy of wealthy and poor, those who get ahead and those who fall behind.

When we read or hear this parable it offends us. Why should those who come at the end of the day be paid the same as those who started working when the sun came up? In our minds, it doesn't seem fair. What was Jesus trying to teach by telling this parable?

Some have tried to interpret it by saying it's not a parable about labor relations, but rather it's a parable about salvation. Those who started working early in the day represent the Jewish people who tried to earn their salvation by works righteousness. Those who came late in the day receive the gift of salvation without having to do much work at all. They represent Christians who go to heaven by grace, but not by working hard. Thus, this is a lesson of legalism versus grace.

Rabbi Levine, our guide to the parables this summer, critiques this interpretation by saying that anytime you have to put down one religion to make the case for another, you better read the parable again. She argues that this parable is not about salvation in the next world, but is about the more pressing question of salvation in the present moment.

To those who ask today 'Are you saved?' she thinks Jesus might have said: "The better question is: "Do your children have enough to eat?"

Or, “Do you have shelter for the night?” She goes on to say, “What if we saw this parable as about what God would have us do – not to earn our salvation, but to love our neighbor?”

The shocking part of this parable is at the end, when the landowner pays all of the workers the same amount, whether they started working at six in the morning, 9:00, noon, three in the afternoon or an hour before quitting time. Understandably, those who worked all day felt it was unfair that the owner paid everyone the same amount.

But the landowner replies that he has not cheated them of anything. They agreed on a daily wage; they thought it was fair and they went to work. They were glad to have the work. He treated them justly; he paid them what he said he would. He did them no wrong.

The owner treated all the workers equally, and those first hired resented that treatment. Yes, the workers are disgruntled, but the householder has the last word. He is no evil tyrant or elitist exploiter. It is the laborers – who do not want the last hired to have a living wage – who are in the wrong.

The owner gives what had been generously contracted to every worker, regardless of the time their employment began. Well, maybe Jesus parable does have something to do with economics after all. Such a focus would be consistent with His teaching, and it would fit neatly within a first century context.

To allegorize this parable and to make it about who gets into Heaven is to make the parable safe and comfortable. It loses its punch and its challenge. This parable has very practical implications to it. Jesus encouraged landowners to enact the graciousness of God by speaking of a vineyard owner who generously assisted some impoverished day workers.

The owner is the role model for the rich. They should continue to call others to the field and righteously fulfill a contract whose conditions are from the beginning to pay “what is right,” and what is right is a living wage.

If it turns out that the last hired really were too weak to work, then we might conclude with regard to fairness that the owner has simply requested from each person what they are capable of doing, and paying them what each of them needs.

The equality of the owner’s payment and thus his treating all of his workers equally, derives from a sense of justice keyed into what people need to live.

The owner not only fulfilled his contract with those he first hired; he also paid a full wage to those who might not have expected it. The only point the workers could make about him was that he was generous to others. And in making that point, the workers learned their economic lesson. The point is not that those who have “get more,” but that those who have not “get enough.”

One goes to work in the labor force, in God’s kingdom, not for more reward, but for the benefit of all. The next day, perhaps the first will be last, and those who grumbled in the evening about bonuses will be desperate in the morning for any job at all.

Rabbi Levine says the parable does not support egalitarianism; instead, it encourages owners to support laborers, all of them. Not just the best and brightest, but also the slow, the physically and mentally challenged, those who have been released from prison, the old and the young. All means all. Everyone deserves a job.

And more than simply aiding those who show up on your doorstep, those who have should seek out those who need. If the owner can afford

it, he should continue to put others on the payroll, pay them a living wage (even if they can't put in a full day's work) and so allow them to feed their families while keeping their dignity intact. This is not a giveaway program, but way to benefit all the members of society.

This parable is practical; it is edgy and it is a greater challenge to the church today than the entirely unsurprising idea that God is concerned about *when* we enter the Kingdom. God instead wants us to enter the kingdom simply by enacting God's justice.

Jesus is neither a Marxist nor a capitalist. Rather, he is both an idealist and a pragmatist. His focus is less often on charity to the poor than on the responsibility of the rich. Jesus is simply following what is said in Deuteronomy 15:11, which we read earlier: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land.'"

In this parable, the last hired benefit from the contract made with their coworkers; they benefit from an employer who pays a just wage to those who labor; and they benefit from an employer who is generous with his money. Thus, not only do owner and laborer need each other, the work of some laborers benefits the lives of others.

In the end, all have enough to eat, and the rich recognize their responsibility to those less well off, a responsibility that includes not simply giving a handout or charity, but hiring workers who can thus preserve their dignity.

If we take away the anti-Jewish sentiment that has overshadowed our understanding of this parable, we can keep Jesus in his own social context. If we refocus the parable away from "who gets into heaven" and toward

“who gets a day’s wage,” we find a message that challenges rather than prompts complacency.

If we look at economics, at the pressing reality that people need jobs and that others have excess funds, we find what should be a compelling message in any generation. This parable has less to do with who gets into heaven and when, and more to do with what God’s kingdom of justice looks like here and now.

May God’s kingdom come, on earth as we dream it is in Heaven.
Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing, NY, NY, 2014, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” pp. 213-237.