

## Equal Pay for Unequal Work

Matthew 20:1-16  
Year A, Proper 20

Sometimes parables really mess up our perception of how things ought to be, don't they? The one for today does that for me, and it's similar to the one of the Prodigal Son. As the elder son was fully justified in resenting the lavish welcome of his no-good brother, so should the people who labored all day long receive more money for their work compared to those who only worked for one hour. That's only just, only right.

But wait, this parable describes something quite different. It's really about a radical restructuring of society. The key to understanding all this is the first line, "For the kingdom of God is like..." Jesus wasn't describing what things were like on earth, but rather how things would be once the kingdom or realm of God is realized.

The day-long laborers view the landowner (who's standing in for God) as unjust, when in reality he is radically just. In his eyes, everyone is equal, whether they spent all day in the field or only part of the day. God shows no partiality; all are equally deserving of the opportunity to work so the reward for all workers is equal as well. So why does this story seem so unjust to us? Why do we, like the hard-working day laborers, feel God is being unjust?

Humans have often put their own desires above God's. Everywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures we hear of "murmurings" against God, and the Israelites being a "stiff-necked people". We even have an example in today's reading about Jonah, who was pushed out of shape because God saved Nineveh. Jonah wanted God to destroy the city in spite of the fact that the people of Nineveh repented. Instead of being thankful for the city's repentance, he was angry. When God took the tree away, Jonah was again angry and wanted to die, even though he had done nothing to deserve its comforting shade the previous day. There was an instant feeling of entitlement on the part of Jonah, which is not unlike feelings that we may experience. This entitlement was also felt by the laborers in the Gospel reading.

Has anyone ever heard the phrase "assumptions are planned resentments?" Assumptions are planned resentments. Another way of saying this is when we assume things, we are setting the stage for our resentment of the other party. I suspect that I'm not the only one to have made assumptions about a certain matter, only to have them prove false. Of course, the fact that I shouldn't have made assumptions in the first place doesn't enter my mind in the least. Does something like the following, usually expressed with an air of indignation, sound familiar? "I assumed you put gas in the car." We set up ourselves as well as our conversation partner when we make assumptions. In seminary, we were cautioned about assumptions. Priests sometimes assume that congregations can grasp immediately what they're getting at, regardless of how oblique the message is. Congregation members sometimes assume that priests know they are

experiencing a particularly bad time in their lives and need pastoral care, or that someone has fallen ill. They become disappointed or sometimes even subversive if the priest hasn't acted as anticipated. This has not been my experience here; you have all been very good about keeping me involved and informed, but I have seen this in previous churches.

What if the only assumptions we made were the following:

1. God loves me and all of creation deeply and profoundly;
2. I and all others are made in the image of God;
3. God's generosity is beyond our wildest imagination; and
4. There is nothing I can do to earn or deserve God's generosity.<sup>1</sup>

Wouldn't our lives be changed rather dramatically?

Another reason we think this parable is unjust is our view of money. Money is a way that we show economic worth and value, but money has another function, one that is deeper and sometimes subconscious. It separates us. It divides us into rich and poor, winner and loser, superior and inferior, insider and outsider, and honored and shamed. How utterly counter-cultural, then, is Jesus when he uses money not as a way of dividing people into different camps, but rather to express equality and solidarity. Remember, he's describing what the realm of God will be like, not how things were at that time.

The workers who had worked all day long had to wait in line while the "newcomers" were paid. They were anticipating a larger payment due to their having worked so long. They perceived themselves as superior to the others. After they received their agreed upon pay, they say, "...you have made them equal to us..." Don't we sometimes carry these same attachments to work? People who have been unemployed for a long time often feel isolated and inferior. And conversely, those who have been able to keep their jobs might think of themselves as superior because they perceive they are more valued at their place of work than co-workers who have been fired. There are so many factors, though, that go into a decision whether to fire someone or not, and most of those are out of our control. The economic environment, the type of industry, the skills of the upper-level managers, and the amount of money in the bank can all influence whether a person remains employed or not, and these have nothing to do with the value of a worker.

If there's any good that has come out of our current economic difficulties, perhaps it's a reminder that we are often not in control of our work situation. I would venture to guess that most of us know of someone who has been out of work for more than six months, not because they are unskilled or poor workers, but because there is simply no work available for them. And deep in our hearts we know that we could readily join them as being unemployed if things turn much worse. Are you also left with the impression that the landowner/God went back to seek more workers not because he needed them, but because he wanted to offer them the opportunity to work? Otherwise, he would have hired everyone once in the early morning and have them work all day long.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, "Pastoral Perspective for Proper 20," *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, gen. eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 94.

We don't want to hear the words "the last shall be first and the first last" if we are the ones who are first. This phrase also appears in the story immediately preceding the one that we read today, when Peter asked Jesus questions after hearing the parable of the rich, young man. It also sets the tone a few chapters later when Jesus meets the scribes and Pharisees, when shows their "holier-than-thou" attitude of greatness is relative. Today's story is a call to humility, a trait often not highly regarded now, yet it is one that Jesus talks about and exemplifies constantly.

John Calvin, writing about Christian freedom in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, indicated that there are two ways that laborers can think of their work. First, they can serve God because of fear of punishment or in anticipation of payment. This is the manner of a servant. The second way, though, is to see labor as a gift, working joyfully, remembering that work is offered generously. This is the manner of work of an off-spring, rather than as a servant. These workers are like children who love and wish to please the parent and are dedicated to the parent's work. Thus it should be for us, as children of God. We can either toil expecting our reward or be grateful that we have been given God's work to do with no expectation of reward. The question arises, "What kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not?" The answer is: a just God. Workers must recognize the opportunity to work in the vineyard, whether it represents the church or the furthering of peace in the world, as a gift in itself. The alternative to doing God's work is to stand by idly and waste one's life. This is not God's plan for us, for none of us should experience a wasted life. As a result, we are all extended the invitation to do God's work, regardless of who we are or our station in life. There's plenty of God's work to do, whether we've received the invitation early or late. We are all equally deserving of the opportunity to work, as well as the one heavenly reward offered to all.<sup>2</sup> Amen.

by Fr. Kirby M. Smith

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn D. Blanchard, "Theological Perspective for Proper 20," *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, gen. eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 94.