

March 1, 2009
Week 24

Is this Really Fair?
The Generous Landowner
Matthew 20:1-16

We've seen the landowner appear in other parables. He's the farmer who sows the seed of the message of the kingdom of heaven. He's the judge who separates good seed from bad. He's the planter of the tiny mustard seeds. He's the vineyard keeper and giver of talents. The landowner is one of Jesus' favorite characters. If Jesus were a novelist, the landowner would show up as a character in almost every book.

In this story, the landowner needs workers. He hires five times during the day – early, at nine o'clock, at noon, at three o'clock and at five o'clock.

Here's the deal for the first wave of employees: work all day and I'll pay you one denarius. This is a generous and appropriate amount.

The next four waves of employees get a different deal. "I'll pay you whatever is right." It's nebulous, but if someone trusts the employer, then it probably looks like a good deal.

At the end of the day, the workers line up to be paid. The last wave of hired hands is the first crew to be paid. They are paid one denarius for one hour's work. And each successive crew is paid the same.

When it comes time for those loyal workers who've been laboring all day to be paid, they are expecting more. But they're paid one denarius, according to their deal or contract. Needless to say, this causes considerable discussion. "We've been working all day! These losers just got here! How can you be so unfair?"

"Unfair?" replies the landowner. "You're getting exactly what I promised. Take your pay and go. I want to pay the others what I paid you. Don't I have that right? Or are you envious because I'm generous?"

Who is Jesus preaching to? Various groups, of course, from sinners and tax collectors to spiritually hungry everyday people. He's always instructing his apprentices. But one ever-present listener is the religious leader with a fixed paradigm of spirituality and judgment. They're always in the crowd, sometimes learning, sometimes arguing, sometimes plotting, but always struggling while Jesus blows their paradigm into little pieces.

Those little pieces, by the way, are often truths that have been assembled badly. Like a dad trying to assemble a bicycle in the wee hours of Christmas morning, sometimes there are parts left lying on the floor at the end of the good effort. The wise thing to do would be to disassemble and try again. The clumsy thing to do can also be very costly – just burying the standard parts in a cupboard somewhere in case it ever becomes apparent that they are indispensable.

In the case of the religious people of Jesus' day, there are parts and pieces of the truth that have been carelessly neglected in the assembly of their religious system. One glaring part that's missing from the system is grace. Jesus will not let them bury grace in the cupboard.

Here are some truths about the kingdom of heaven that should be obvious from this parable and other teachings from Jesus. First, it's not something we earn. The kingdom of heaven is not something we can earn or work for. It's not something we get because we deserve it. Rather (second), it is a gift. The kingdom is a kindness and a generosity from God offered to us because it is *like God* to do so. And third, in the kingdom of heaven, the last will be first and the first will be last. Jesus says this more than once and in various settings. The kingdom of God is an upside-down realm where latecomers enjoy the benefits of long-timers, and prodigal children receive the rewards of loyal kids, and servants get treated like kings. If we do not understand these three truths about God's kingdom, we will either push it away or spend our kingdom days without the conspiratorial pleasure of seeing, knowing and participating in the humor and wonder of God's ways.

Why are his ways hard for us? Why do we struggle to understand and accept and reflect the manner of God in these things? Why is the parable of the vineyard workers difficult for us?

Are we stuck on the notion of earning? Are we so accustomed to the cause-and-effect principles that appear to govern our economy that something less definable feels like anathema to us?

Are we stuck on the notion of fairness? Are we convinced that everyone should get their due for better or worse? *When people get more than their due, that's as unfair as the times when people get less than their due!*

Are we jealous of the latecomers' pay? Do we believe that we should have gotten more than *the deal* because others prospered from the landowner's seemingly random generosity? Where are my extras?

Or are we jealous of the latecomers' for other reasons? After all, they lollygagged through the day and only worked at the last minute. *I wish I could have fiddled around and then jumped in late!*

Do we actually regret our day spent in labor? Was it a waste of a day? Was it a bad way to spend our hours?

Maybe we just want more, pure and simple. Our jealousy is really just our appetite for more, more, more.

Or do we begrudge the landowner's right to do as he pleases? Are we bothered because the landowner has authority over us in still one more way? *We're helpless pawns in the chess game of life!*

Maybe we wish for a more concrete and predictable system – like clear cause and effect? Maybe we struggle with the fluid nature of grace and generosity.

Is this all one more control issue? We want a system that's in our control, our hands, our fortune to win or lose, our destiny to make or break.

What isn't a control issue?

Of course, at the heart of control is fear. What are we really afraid of? Putting our destiny in the hands of another? But what if the other has bigger hands and an enormous heart? What, then, is there to fear?

The heart of the story is the heart of the landowner. Until we understand his heart – God's heart – the story makes no sense. The Christian system makes no sense. We can't understand why God would build a religion around grace, mercy and forgiveness instead of fairness. Of course, if the system were based on fairness, every one of us would be in

big trouble, since we've all sinned and fallen short of God's standard. But we're arrogant enough to paint others' sins in bold colors and our own in pastels. Or else we paint them all – ours included – in pastels and paint God's high standard of purity out of the picture. Either way, we miss the whole if we miss the heart, and God's heart is love, grace, mercy, redemption. God loves redemption stories.

And God invites us to grow our hearts into his heart. He compels us by attraction to embrace this way of living and loving and seeing the world. Broken, but not beyond redemption. Tormented, but not outside the reach of peace and healing. Every angry bear is really a porcupine. Every scowling grouch is actually a thirsty, dried up soul who can't find his way to the water.

There is a river. Running, dancing, flowing, laughing, the River of Lavish Grace plenishes the earth with the undeserved, unearned but altogether eager favor of God. Living near the river without a full baptism is like religion that pretends to know God but misses the better part.

But is this really fair? We cry out, not always to God because he keeps winking at us like a kind and knowing grandparent who's just waiting for us to quit fighting and settle into the lap of truth.

No. It's not fair. It's better than fair. This is love.