

**Sermon - First UCC 3.17.19**  
**Lauren Baske Davis**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

*1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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." 13 But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

**Sermon**

God's kin-dom, according to Jesus, is like a kind vineyard owner who goes to the marketplace early in the morning to hire day laborers for his vineyard. He agrees to pay them a fair daily wage, a denarius, which would allow them to feed a small family that night. They go to work.

But throughout the day, the vineyard owner keeps returning to the marketplace. Despite the fact that Jesus never says the vineyard owner needed more workers, the vineyard owner keeps going back to the marketplace—at 9am, noon, and 3pm—hiring people and promising he will pay them “whatever is right.”

The vineyard owner even goes back to the marketplace at 5 pm, one hour before the workday was to end. And there were laborers who were still waiting, still hoping to work.... Why? They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." Which might mean they wouldn't eat that night. Now why wouldn't they be hired? There's so much we don't know. Perhaps they weren't the ideal candidates. Were they elderly? Were they children? Were they differently abled? Were they felons? Were they foreign? Maybe they weren't "as literate, educated, or skilled as their competition. Perhaps they had children or sick family to care for at home. Maybe they had transportation difficulties. Maybe they...didn't have green cards, or suffered discrimination."<sup>1</sup> Whatever the case may be, the vineyard owner doesn't ask these laborers to defend themselves. He just asks them to come work.

And did you notice, when the work day has ended, that the vineyard owner pays the workers in the reverse order? First he pays those most recently hired at 5, then the ones hired at 3, then noon, then 9, at the *end*, paying the ones he hired *first* in the early morning. All of them get the same day's wage. And we know what *they* thought: Its. Not. Fair.

Why would the vineyard owner pay them in reverse order? Why not just pay the workers who worked the whole day first so that they leave before they saw the others get the

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas, "A Troubling Generosity," Journey with Jesus website, Posted 17 Sept 2017, accessed 22 Sept 2017 and 13 March 2019, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1500>

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same pay? It would've avoided awkwardness. Did the vineyard owner *want* them to see this unfairness?

...Or is he just unapologetically generous—wanting them all to see what radical generosity looks like? Notice, the workers who worked all day grumble, but they don't say, "hey, you should pay us more!" They complain, "We worked in the scorching heat of the day, they didn't, and you have made them equal to us!" "You have made them equal to us." In other words, we deserve it, they don't. That's the rub right there, isn't it? In a "you-get-what-you-deserve-world", mercy looks a lot like injustice.<sup>2</sup> Mercy looks a lot like unfairness to the people who were first in line. And we know how the vineyard owner responds: "are you envious because I am generous?"

"Are you envious because I am generous?" Literally, "is your eye evil because I am good?" Or perhaps more meaningfully translated, "Are you offended because my generosity exposes your poverty of spirit?"<sup>3</sup> Ouch. Those are the kinds of questions that will rattle the cage we build around our hearts.

In The Chronicle this week, I mentioned Frederick Buechner's advice on scripture: "Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks."<sup>4</sup>

"Are you offended because my generosity exposes your poverty of spirit?" This is the question we are meant to listen for today. Does it feel a little too close? Do we know what it is to be offended by the gifts or generosity others receive when we think they don't deserve it? These questions hurt a little, or perhaps are offensive, but they are truthful.

The question the vineyard owner speaks is truth that too often we don't want, but need to hear: that God loves, God values those we devalue—those we deem unworthy, less than, lazy, ignorant—just as much as God loves and values us. God's generous grace flows to all people and places from whom we have withheld our love. Are you offended because God is generous?" That's not just a question for the vineyard workers. That is a question for us. And is it fair? No its not.

Is it fair that all were paid the same despite working different amounts? No. The vineyard owner makes sure that the workers end the day with the dignity and security of a living wage — the capacity to go home that night and feed their family. Is it fair? No. Is it loving? Yes.

I want to tell you a modern parable. Another example of fairness versus generosity from a long canceled TV sitcom. A father is making a special dinner for his two daughters. He has an extra piece of mango left over, so he gives it to his oldest daughter. Unsurprisingly, his younger daughter takes some issue with this injustice.

"She got a (piece of) mango and I didn't," she complains.

"That's right," he says, and continues cooking. "Sometimes she gets things you don't and sometimes, it goes the other way. That's just how life works."

"But daddy," the youngest pleads, "it's not fair!"

"Who said anything about fair?" he asks, a little incredulous. "You were just fine without

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker, "#354, Laborers in the Vineyard," I Love to Tell the Story Narrative Lectionary Podcast, posted March 9, 2019, accessed 13 March, 2019, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1115](https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1115)

<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Tom Long

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 1993

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it until she got it. What's the problem?"

"It's just not fair," she insisted. "If she gets one, I should get one too."

So he stops cooking, and he kneels down to her and meets her eyes: "Look," he says, "the *only* time you need to worry about what's in your neighbor's bowl is when you're checking to *make sure they have enough.*"

"Are you offended because I am generous?" This is a good question for us to live with for today. Because it gives clear and much needed promise: God is not fair, God is generous. That's a hard reality for the people in the front of the line who do good hard work.

And if you're like me, we naturally put ourselves in the perspective of the workers who were hired first. Whether you're the workers in the vineyard or in an "average [modern] household, [at some point or another] we all get the idea that we deserve something because we've worked harder or been the one to plan adequately and show up on time with the homework done. We're the ones who have put in the time, or sweated the most, or sacrificed the most. We don't want what *we've* been given; we [look into another's bowl] and we want more. We *expect* more, based on what we think others do or don't deserve. When in reality, following Jesus means we should be looking in other people's bowls to make sure they have enough and to help them get enough if they don't."<sup>5</sup>

Those early, privileged, hardworking laborers complain, "You have made us equal to them." And the vineyard owner says, "Are you offended because I am generous?" Is this good news? It depends on whether you're "us" or "them." We're all pretty good at creating these categories, classifying one another into measurable boxes, rather than precious, complex, and beloved human beings. And ultimately we know it's the very worst, most insidious version of this kind of us/them thinking that leads to dehumanization and hate—the kind of hate that caused the mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand this week....

But in the wake of this unspeakable action, God's generosity is present among us. The confirmation students and I witnessed it at the beautiful Jewish synagogue yesterday. We could have been seen as outsiders going where we don't belong, but our incredible host, both rabbis, and the congregation welcomed us graciously in with open arms, with the head rabbi declaring to us, "especially in the wake of the tragedy in New Zealand, the world needs more of this," encouraging our confirmation students to "keep doing this"—to keep reaching out, keep making connections, to keep equalizing people, and to keep checking each other's bowls to make sure everyone else has enough.

In Jesus' parable this morning, we are asked to lean into God's abundant generosity, knowing it will prevail over fairness. To which I say, thanks be to God. May we all have the courage to be laborers, workers, for that kin-dom of God, centering ourselves in generosity and grace for the sake of all. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Aase, "Practicing Good Order," Sermon March 2015, accessed 22 Sept 2017, and 14 March 2019, <http://riverofhopehutchinson.org/practicing-good-order/#more-2240>