

9-20-26 sermon
Matthew 20.1-16

This is a story about God's grace. God's scandalous grace, that often offends, where even those who only get in on it at the very end still get all the benefits. That, at least, is what I've mostly heard about this parable in sermons and bible studies over the years. I remember reading Max Lucado's re-imagining of the story in the early '90s. He wondered who would still be hanging around, hoping to be hired on, at 5pm. In his telling, it was a 15 year old boy, and a crippled old man, nursing a cigarette, and when they were told to hop in the back of the pickup, Old Joe said, "It sure feels good to be chosen, don't it?" And there it is – God's grace – the same for everyone, the first and the last. And that sounds about right.

Except.

Except the parables aren't often that clear. Throughout the four Gospels, Jesus often ends a parable by saying, "Let the one with ears to hear, hear!" And many times, the disciples pull him aside and say, "Uhh, we don't get it. You're going to have to explain it for us. Again." So, perhaps we should be wary of accepting the 'obvious' meaning of this parable, and walk around in the story a little bit more, to see what we might be missing.

One person who has helped me do that is Wilson Dickinson. Wilson lives in Georgetown, is ordained in the Disciples of Christ tradition, and currently serves at Lexington Theological Seminary. He is also a friend. In his wonderful book, *The Green Good News*, he has a chapter on the parables. And after reading that chapter, I realized something. Over the years, as I've read the Gospels, when Jesus introduces a parable with, "The kingdom of heaven is like...", I always assume it's a *positive* one-to-one comparison. But a better translation may be, "The Kingdom of heaven may be compared with...", which opens up the possibility of a *negative* comparison. As I began to revisit the parables, I wondered how many times I have equated God with the main character in the parable and unthinkingly accepted what that implied *about* God. So, is God *really* like the landowner in this parable? Fair towards those who came first, and generous towards those who came last? Let's take a closer look.

I don't know if you're familiar with the plight of day laborers today, but they are a particularly vulnerable part of the workforce. When we lived in Houston, there were several official sites where people could hire day laborers. Workers whose IDs had been validated, and who were guaranteed to make at least minimum wage. In our neighborhood, there were a couple of street corners that functioned as *unofficial* sites. Those sites were where laborers – often undocumented – waited, and if you needed some extra muscle on your building site, or a couple of guys to move some furniture, there were plenty of brown-skinned young men willing to hop in the back of your pickup. Cash in hand, no paperwork, no questions asked. And – for them – no guarantees. I got to know some of those guys, and they were often ripped off. Not paid what they were promised. Didn't get the hours they were told. Or paid in food, when they needed cash for rent, and with no recourse when that happened, because where could they go to complain? I suspect those street corners are empty now, and have been for many months, for fear of the masked men who roam our streets.

Things weren't much different in the first century. Except day laborers were at the very bottom of the labor pool, even lower than enslaved labor. Roman manuals for estate management recommended day laborers for back-breaking work, so you didn't risk injury to your *enslaved* workers! Most of the men for hire – at one denarius a day – were in the most vulnerable class in the Ancient Near East, including Israel. The expendable class – those *without* land and familial bonds to provide a safety net. Their life was brutal and often cut short.

Now, in the Law God gave to the people of Israel, there was to *be* no expendable class. Because God allotted land to every tribe, every clan, every family. Enough land to support a simple agrarian life. A life where familial and clan bonds ensured that even if disaster hit an individual family they would not become destitute. And even if they *had* to sell their land for some reason, every 50 years, their family would get it back in the Year of Jubilee when all debts were canceled, all land returned. So that no one in Israel could become rich in land and wealth at the expense of their neighbors. At least, that was how it was *supposed* to work.

But it didn't. For those who lost their land, at best they could hope to work as tenant farmers on it, the *new* owners benefitting greatly from their labor, while the farmers barely made it. At worst, they would be kicked off the land, and many ended up like the men in this parable. As anyone who grows their own food knows, there are certain seasons in the garden, or on the farm, when there's a burst of activity: preparing the soil for planting; planting itself; and then harvest. The rest of the time it's slow, steady maintenance work. In the first century, the extended family could just about handle all of it. And neighbors pitched in during harvest season – much like they still do in the few remaining small-scale farming communities in this country. But, if you had *added* to your family's landholdings – especially if you had added a *lot more* land – then your own family, even with enslaved labor, couldn't always manage the work. So then you turned to the expendable class – you found day laborers.

Enter the landowner in today's parable.

It's important to recognize that from the very beginning of this story, Jesus' audience would have known this was not the way things used to be. And certainly not the way they *ought* to be. They may have been living in the land God promised their ancestors, but the vast majority of them were not living the *life* God promised their ancestors. Certainly some of those listening would have been all too familiar with the experience of the day laborers in the parable.

Well, this landowner can't manage his own estates with his extended family, so he needs to hire help. Not at a living wage. Not even at a minimum wage. But a subsistence wage, if that. If you own enough land to need outside labor, then you are among the wealthiest members of first century Israel. Certainly wealthy enough to comfortably afford to pay *more* than a denarius a day. And perhaps, knowing that, the workers asked for more. But the landowner agreed only for the standard denarius a day. He points at a few of them, and off they go with him, back to his vineyards.

Why does he keep coming back?

Not once, not twice, but *four* times. Did he just underestimate how much help he'd need? Or was he deliberately using as few laborers as possible, to keep costs down, only going back when it became apparent that they couldn't get the work done with those he'd already hired?

Well, at the end of the 12 hours' work, the landowner instructs the foreman to line them up, from last to first. When those who had only worked an hour saw the denarius the foreman pressed into the palm of their hand, I'm sure they were delighted! And as word spread quickly back down the line, those who had toiled all day in the scorching sun must have been very excited – imagining they were going to be paid far more than the denarius they had agreed to. But when they looked down to see that one solitary denarius in the palm of *their* hand, they grumbled.

I'm sure they did.

The expendable class didn't have much hope, and what little they might have felt that day had just been squashed. They courageously confront the landowner, who simply notes that he has been fair with them – paying them what they agreed. He says, "So, take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" And then Jesus concludes the parable with something he has said many times when he's talking about the kingdom of God, "Thus, the last shall be first, and the first, last."

So, what *are* we to do with this parable?

Perhaps we *can* just take it at face value, and say that God is like this landowner, being fair with the first, and generous with the last. But how exactly does that *make* the last, first, and the first, last? Because they all got the same. There's no reversal here. Just a leveling. And that doesn't seem to be consistent with Jesus' teaching. Here we have a very wealthy man, who is paying fellow members of the Covenant community a pittance to work on his land. Is Jesus *really* saying, "God is like this landowner"? Someone who has only become wealthy because of others' misfortune – or worse? Someone who could take those laborers – and their families if they have them – into his own extended household, so he would have plenty of help, and *they* would have a life worth living? But he doesn't, apparently. He just sees them as expendable.

So, if that's the case, why *does* he pay the laborers who only worked an hour the same as those who worked all day? I wonder if it's so he can see himself *as a generous* man, as he describes himself, rather than as a *greedy* man. Or, perhaps, he liked to pit poor, working people *against* each other, as has been done throughout history by those with economic power. Perhaps it's so he can teach his children to be charitable towards the less fortunate.

Or perhaps he truly *is* compassionate, and is making sure that *everyone* who worked on his land that day will have enough to eat.

Perhaps.

But I kept coming back to that one statement he makes when he justifies his behavior to those who questioned it: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?" No *faithful* member of the Covenant community of Israel could say that, because all the land – and what the land provides – belongs to God. Those who lived on the land were stewards of what belonged to God, and the land was supposed to provide enough for *all*. But this landowner – apparently – saw the land, and his wealth, as belonging to *him*. And if he felt like giving a little extra to the poor unfortunates, well, that's a good thing, surely?

I confess, I much prefer the reading of this parable that I've heard all my life – that it's about God's grace and generosity – rather than the version of the story I've just outlined. Because the traditional reading doesn't make any demands of me. At most, it just invites *me* to be charitable – like God, the landowner in the story. It does not invite me to do *justice*. It invites me to be generous towards those for whom the economic systems we've built do not work, rather than question the economic systems themselves. It invites me to give from my excess to non-profits working with those at the bottom, rather than question why more and more people find themselves *at* the bottom. No, if the kingdom of heaven is truly like this landowner, and charity given from excess is what is required, then not much about my life – or our society – needs to change.

This parable is the Gospel reading assigned for this weekend in the Revised Common Lectionary. The challenge with the Lectionary, is that it skips whole chunks of the Gospel, without us realizing. Last week I preached from Matthew 18, on Jesus' teaching about forgiveness. Today, I'm preaching from chapter 20. But we missed chapter 19, in which someone who sounds very much like *he* could be this landowner, comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him, "Sell all you own, give the money to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, then, come, follow me!" But when the young man heard this statement," Matthew tells us, "he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property." And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." And good old Peter blurts out, "Look, we've left everything and followed you; what will there be for us?" Jesus says, "Everyone who has left houses, or family, or farms for my name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life. "But many who are first, will be last; and the last, first."

I think it's fair to say that it's not our *wealth* that's the problem: it's our relationship *to* our wealth – what we think it's for. I wonder if the question before you and I today is whether or not we are like this landowner, who declares, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?" Will we just be charitable with our excess? Or will we work for economic justice? Will we find ourselves among the first, or the last? Because in the Great Reversal of the Gospel: "It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven." But for those of us who are, indeed, among the rich, perhaps we can take heart. Because Jesus followed up that hard truth by saying, "But with God, all things are possible."

May it be so.