

Jonah 3:10-4:11 (Ex. 16:2-15) Mt. 20:1-16

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Mt. 19:30; 20:16) Some of you may relate to this childhood scenario: the school bell rings and we all flood out of the classroom onto the playground for recess. Before the ‘fun’ game of kickball can take place, the team captains firstly choose the most athletic and skilled to ensure the best possible combo for a win. The elite pool shrinks down until only a few undesirables remain. I was usually amongst the last chosen.

In 6th grade, I was the tallest kid even among boys. My legs were gangly, which suited me fine as a ballerina hence my nickname, “Twinkle-toes”. Besides other physical attributes that didn’t measure up, I was a bookworm and the teacher’s ‘pet’. Plus, I was a girl! And most of us were always chosen last. I wished I’d remembered the Bible verse from today! “The last will be first and the first will be last!”

Little seems to change as we advance into the adult league. The world chooses those who offer the best guarantee of a win. Apparently, God didn’t get the memo. It’s statistically proven, that in the world’s economy, the ‘best’ get chosen first. In God’s economy, all are chosen. No one is left standing alone. And we all reap the same prize – God’s generosity.

Matthew’s gospel offers yet another lesson in score-keeping following on the heels of last week’s teaching; admonishing us to quit tallying how often we forgive. To sum up: forgiveness has no limits. This week, in part two of score-keeping, in the parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard we discover God’s generosity, just like God’s mercy, refuses to be hemmed in by humanity. We learn that justice and grace live in tension, but not at odds with each other. It isn’t who God chooses, or more importantly – who God doesn’t choose to exclude. It’s what God chooses. God chooses generosity for all.

In this allegory of God’s kingdom as the vineyard with the owner understood as God, the vignette depicts the familiar practice of hiring day laborers. To recap, at the crack of dawn, the pool of workers agree with the owner to a negotiated ‘daily’ wage and are then sent out into the vineyard. Hours later the owner returns to the marketplace to hire more workers who have since amassed there. This time there is no negotiated rate. Instead, they will simply receive “whatever is right.” Again, at noon the owner finds yet more ‘unchosen’ and takes them into the vineyard. This happens again at 3 p.m. and again nearly at the end of the workday. The owner wonders why they are standing idle there. They reply that no one has chosen. Notably, for these 11th hour hires, there is no discussion of payment at all. They are completely reliant upon the mercy and generosity of the owner.

Well that all seems exceedingly generous so far. Where’s the rub? It’s when the last workers are paid first. Wouldn’t you be peeved, if you were among the first workers having endured longer hours, even all day? And wouldn’t you be even more shocked and outraged to get the same amount as those who hardly lifted a finger?!! Of course we would! It’s an affront to what we’d been taught our whole lives. How unfair! Fairness has nothing to do with it.

Why should we cast an 'evil eye' towards the benefactor whose right it is to choose generosity? We cling to the notion of earning and worth, of 'what is due' us. And we don't limit it to financial matters. Traditionally this parable is interpreted allegorically; comparing disbursement of grace among God's constituents: newcomers versus first-called, Jews versus Christians, prophets old versus prophets new.

Theologically, this parable is stressing, not just suggesting, that all of God's chosen (and all are chosen) are granted grace in equal measure, without calculating worth. There is no such thing as comparative Grace!

And in this complex story other implications lurk. Consider payment. The usual daily wage was a denarius; "barely enough to maintain a family at the subsistence level." (New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, p.393) Listeners would have been amazed and appalled to think about receiving a full day's wage regardless of how many hours worked, even if it was meager pay. It would mean that no one's family should go hungry. 20th c. American Catholic activist Dorothy Day, notes the subversive and unsettling thrust of Jesus promoting a 'living wage' over competitive economics where so-called losers are edged out of existence.

You may recall the efforts of the Work Projects Administration during President Roosevelt's tenure. It was created to combatting the devastating economic effects of the depression. During the eight years it was in existence, the WPA employed roughly 8.5 million people, the average pay \$41.57/month (PBS series The American Experience, "Surviving the Dust Bowl"). Workers built bridges, roads, public buildings, parks, airports and more. Artists were also supported because as Harry Hopkins, director of the WPA put it, "even artists have to eat." He also said, "Give a man a dole and you save his body and destroy his spirit. Give him a job and you save both body and spirit." It appears that the landowner in the parable is the original equal opportunity employer and implementer of a divine WPA.

Another question to reflect upon in this parable might be- what was the point of the landowner going back again, again and again to the marketplace? This was not typical employment practice. This describes divine generosity and a call to exclude no one. What would the point have been if the last-called workers had been paid a pro-rated amount? They wouldn't have benefited one iota. The gospel speaks to the need for a living wage!

It was a problem in Jesus' day. It was a problem during the depression. It sure as heck is a problem now with the economic devastation caused by the Covid-19 virus. When people can't feed their families they will turn to desperate measures. Hungry mouths say choose me! Human justice says, "I'm more deserving and I am keeping score." Divine justice says, "Dignity and equality for everyone."

Whether one views extreme income inequality as a moral, societal, political, or psychiatric problem; not meeting basic subsistence needs is a theological problem for Christians. Divine generosity keeps going back to the marketplace time and time again to ensure that everyone is chosen and argues against human notions of justice score-keeping. The question is: What do I choose?

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