

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Title: “Parables of Jesus: Reversals that Pinch”

My brother, sister and I grew up surrounded by farm fields. And when my brother and I were old enough, either he or I—for some reason both of us weren’t called together—we’d get a call in the evening from one of our friends asking us if we wanted to pick the next morning. It didn’t happen a lot but we both had friends who were members of farm families and once in a while they either didn’t have enough migrant workers or they couldn’t hire the usual people, so they’d call us to pick peppers or beans or strawberries.

I remember getting those calls which meant I had to get up early in the morning, ride my bike a few miles down to Tom McGuire’s house, hop in the back of his dad’s pick up which would then take us to the fields.

It was so early that the dew-soaked field dirt would stick to the hands and the plants themselves were wet and cold. Sometimes we could see our breath in the morning. Tennis shoes became like sponges it seemed as our feet moved through the rows tightly planted.

There were times we were picking alongside migrant workers, and I remember trying to pick as much as they did, but I couldn’t. None of us who weren’t in the fields every day all day could. They were fast. Hard workers. Professionals really. We were the amateurs. But there we all were, out in the early morning, picking fields for growers.

Whenever I hear or read Jesus’ parable of the farmer hiring people to work in his vineyard, inevitably those early experiences in the field come to mind. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells the parable this way:

20 “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.”

Thinking about this from the perspective of a field hand, I want to protest immediately along with those who grumbled. I want to grumble right along with them because this way of doing business isn’t fair. We know from our own experience from early childhood on up that we get paid for what we do and that the harder we work the more we will get paid. At least that’s the simplistic version of how things work in our culture’s economy.

Remember one of Aesop’s Fables told to children? The Ants & the Grasshopper:

One bright day in late autumn a family of Ants were bustling about in the warm sunshine, drying out the grain they had stored up during the summer, when a starving Grasshopper, his fiddle under his arm, came up and humbly begged for a bite to eat.

"What!" cried the Ants in surprise, "haven't you stored anything away for the winter? What in the world were you doing all last summer?"

"I didn't have time to store up any food," whined the Grasshopper; "I was so busy making music that before I knew it the summer was gone."

The Ants shrugged their shoulders in disgust.

"Making music, were you?" they cried. "Very well; now dance!" And they turned their backs on the Grasshopper and went on with their work.

There's a time for work and a time for play.

We are indoctrinated with a sense of fairness. That honest work deserves fair pay. And that lesson is taught well from early on. Fairness and justice is a biblical concept, right? The words of Jesus in Luke: "...the laborer deserves to be paid." (Luke 10:4.) Or what about the famous words of the prophet Amos: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an

ever-flowing stream.” What’s right is right! What’s fair is fair!

So what is Jesus doing telling this parable in Matthew that apparently condones the practice of rewarding people who simply have not produced as much as those who worked all day? It would have been far simpler, Jesus, if you hadn't told this parable at all. It would have been far easier if we could ignore teachings like this and continue to reinforce our convictions about fairness. Why do you tell parables that pinch like this?

Let's take a look at who these people are in the parable. The hired hands are day laborers. They are not landowners. They are not children earning extra spending money in the fields. And they were not part of a society that provided unemployment or disability or retirement benefits. If they didn't work that day, chances are the family didn't eat very well that day, if they ate at all. The late comers, then, if their pay was equitable may not have had enough to feed the family given the meager earnings of an hour's work. Can you imagine going home to your kids and spouse with the news that there was no work today or only an hour's work today. Not enough to feed everybody. Feeling a failure. Can't even take care of your own family. Can you imagine?

If the parable had been told reinforcing our stiff code of fairness, the last would have been last and the first would have been first. People might have gone hungry and it would have been okay. Fair is fair, after all. Even Aesop’s Fable says so.

But not with this landowner! This boss turns our sense of fairness on its ear with one simple word: "generous." "Are you envious because I am generous?" Everyone receives the same compensation. Everyone is fed. And even though he could have avoided the controversy by paying the first first and sent them away so they didn't witness his generosity, he chose quite the opposite as if to say, "Watch this. I want you to witness this act of love and care."

This is not the kind of generosity at which we marvel, like that of the great saints who give their lives caring for the poorest of the poor, the sick and the dying. This is the kind of generosity that pinches because it turns our values upside down. It completely reverses what we've learned most of our lives and see practiced day in and day out in the culture in which we live.

This parable is completely counter cultural. It is Kingdom behavior: “Generous”. And while my sense of fairness—and maybe yours too—might have left someone hungry, God ignores our strict codes in order to give life. God chooses instead to provide what is needed and even more than what is needed. It’s true what the Prophet Isaiah writes:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

In this, I wonder sometimes if we get confused. Given our practice of recognizing fairness as equal pay for equal work, where value is placed on a person according to hours worked or product produced, do we project that thinking to our relationship with God? Are we the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and asks, “What do I have to do to connect with God in a way that is timeless, never-ending, always present? What do I have to do to get there, to earn

that?" Of course, you remember how he responded to the young man.

But then he moves quickly to this parable of people who according to our way of doing things, earn different levels of pay. As if to say, "You can't earn God's generosity. You can't. You don't get to decide if God is generous or not or how God chooses to be generous. That's not up to you. It's simply given. A gift. God doesn't fit in our box. It's not the way God works. God works outside the limitations of our expectations."

So what do we do with such a God, a God who refuses to conform to our sense of what's right? What do we do with a God who knows that the cross isn't fair either but he goes there nonetheless?

When I think about it, I think I'll move over to God's side. Because when I meet God, I need that generosity. When I'm less than I have wanted to be or expected to be. When I have made mistakes--when I have moved in the wrong direction-- I need that generosity myself. Sometimes I might be standing at the front of the line, sometimes at the back. All I know is God's generosity is a gift to anyone in that line waiting to be paid. And rather than sit and grumble with those paid last or with the elder brother in the prodigal son story who is angry that his father would welcome his wayward son home with a party, it is better to know that **there is a far richer life found in being grateful for being paid at all** and recognizing that the point is not fairness in God's economy. The point in God's economy is found in giving life to people irrespective of hours or days or years worked. **When I'm in need of forgiveness I'll take generous over fair any day. I expect that is true for all of us.**

And when we choose generous over fair according to the Lord's kingdom way, then it informs how we express God's kingdom values to others. I appreciate what a Roman Catholic priest reflected on this parable:

"...if that's really what I get from God--"generous"-- then I need to look at the standards I apply to others. Like the kids at school: not judging them by their looks, or if they are on the varsity team, or have the latest jeans and sneakers. I will need to look at the standards I apply to others and treat all people graciously; whether or not they live in my part of town; have my level of income, education, travel experiences and status on the corporate ladder. I must be sure not to hold back a gracious welcome to the "late-comers" to my parish community or to this country. If I want to stay under the generous judgment I already have received from God, then I had better not walk away judging others by another standard than the one used to judge me---the generous one!"

Jesus way of treating people may offend our sensibilities. His way of generosity may be a reversal of our culture's values and result in feeling a pinch when we consider the implications, but God's ways are not, as Isaiah wrote, our ways. In God's kingdom you are valued because you ARE not because of what you do, whether you come late to the field or are the first one to arrive. It's like the thought I discovered somewhere in my explorations for this morning:

"God's love is not like a pie that leaves less for me every time God gives

someone else a slice and more like a joke that gets funnier every time another person joins the laughing.”

I hope you'll join the laughter this morning and that you'll share the joy of God's kingdom reversal of fairness when it comes to the dispensing of grace, mercy, generosity.