

Narrative Lectionary: Laborers in the Vineyard, March 17, 2019

A pastor told me last week that whenever this parable comes up in the readings, one of his church members doesn't show up. She doesn't like this story, because it goes against her deeply engrained belief that we ought to get what we work for. We should get what we deserve. So I'm glad you didn't notice the gospel reading in the newsletter. And if you did, you showed up anyway!

You've probably driven by a parking lot where day laborers wait every morning to be hired for construction or nursery work. A truck pulls up, and someone hires a couple guys. They make enough to buy some groceries and pay some of the rent. It contributes to a family that is just getting by.

The Palestine in Jesus' day had the same set up somewhere in each village. Men would wait in the village square or in the marketplace until a contractor came along and hired them. So when Jesus is teaching one day he uses this economic situation to describe what the kingdom of heaven is like,

He says, The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. He's probably going out to the village square at 6 in the morning. He hires a couple of guys, tells them he'll give them the usual daily wage, which was called a denarius, one day's wages.

One day's wages could buy only 10-12 loaves of flat bread. A lamb would cost three day's wages. Some new work clothes would cost 30 days' wages. So eating meat or buying new clothes would be out of the question for day laborers. These were subsistence wages.

After a couple hours, he realizes he'll need some more help. So he goes back to the village at 9, hires a couple more. He says to them, I will pay you whatever is right. He apparently isn't a very good estimator of how much help he needs, because at noon and at 3 he is back again. He says the same thing to them: I will pay you whatever is right. Some commentators have tried to find reasons why he kept needing to come back for more workers: the workers weren't very efficient, or there was a storm coming. All of that is irrelevant! What the listeners of the story are wondering is, What would right wages be for people coming later to the vineyard?

Even at 5:00pm, he comes back to hire a couple more. He says, Why are you standing here idle all day? Kind of sounds like he's blaming the workers, doesn't it? Why don't you get a job? And they say, Well, we're still here because no one has hired us. We want to work! He says, You also go into the vineyard.

So the end of the day arrives. Let's say quitting time is six o'clock. The landowner says to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." So we can just picture the line, with the guys hired at 5pm in front. They're thinking, Well, I only worked an hour; maybe I'll get \$10. But the manager gives the last workers hired the usual daily wage. Let's say \$10 an hour for 12 hours work, or \$120 (this was before 8 hour days).

The first guy shouts out, Woo hoo! and begins to walk down the line, holding up his pay and saying, Look at this! And I only worked an hour! So the guy at the end of the line thinks, Wow, this landowner is crazy generous. If he made a full day's wage working just an hour, and I worked all day- I'm gonna make bank!

We can imagine people listening to the story Jesus is telling...some were thinking, This guy is incredibly generous! Some were thinking, He's a terrible business owner. Some were thinking, this will just encourage workers to line up for work at the last hour of the day to get a full day's wage!

The people listening to the story are probably thinking, based on equal pay for equal work, the workers who worked longer will receive more pay. But as these workers come to the front of the line, the manager keeps paying out a full day's salary, no matter how many or how few hours they worked, including the last guy who worked 12 hours. He gets the same amount. So he starts to grumble to his friends, and he finally complains to the landowner: "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."

So if you're the guy who worked all day, it doesn't seem fair. These latecomers did a lot less work than you did, and got paid the same. But if you are the latecomer, and had been waiting around all day to get hired, you still have a family to feed, so what might not be fair to the all day worker is merciful for you.

And apparently the landowner doesn't care what the workers perceive as fair. One of them complains to the landowner, and here's what the owner says: "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

There are four economic arguments made by the landowner at the end of the story. Let me break them down for you. The first is what I'd call the Equality Principal: everyone deserves minimum, subsistence compensation. The 12-hour worker grumbles: You have *made them equal to us* who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat!

Some moral philosophers have said that justice is when everyone has enough, no more and no less. The first economic principal of the landowner is not equal pay for equal work, but that everyone deserves at least minimum, subsistence compensation.

We already have something like that in our society. If you can't work because of a disability, we have Social Security income, maybe \$1200 month, not a crazy amount of money. But the point is you need some subsistence compensation, even if you can't work. The grumbler complains, You made them equal to us. That's right, says the landowner. Each of you has a family; each of you needs to get by. I can help with that.

The second principal is what we might call contract law. The landowner asks, Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? We had an agreement on wages. I'm sticking with the agreement. The third economic principal is that the wealthy are free to choose what they do with their wealth. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

The landowner says, God has made me a steward of my wealth, and I have choices to make. And I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. And the fourth principal is generosity: Are you envious because I am generous? The wealthy should be as generous as the economic system has been generous to them. Warren Buffett has decided that he is going to give most of his money away before he dies. Since 2006 he has given away 30 billion dollars. That's his choice to bless the

world. Whether it is Warren Buffett or you or I, how do we choose to bless the world? Do we choose to be generous?

There have been lots of interpretations of this story throughout the centuries. An early interpretation by the church was what we could call salvation history, with successive eras in the vineyard. At 6am, Adam was called, at 9, Noah, noon: Abraham, 3: Moses, 5:00pm Christ. The denarius is eternal life, given to all the workers in the vineyard.

Another interpretation has been an individual approach. Whether we come to Christ early in life, or as a teenager, or as an adult, or later in life, or on our deathbed, Christ gives us eternal life. We offer what we can to the work of the vineyard, however much time we have, but God offers equal salvation to all. And as you know, my changing theology is that God in Jesus is saving everybody in the vineyard.

By the way, parables can have multiple interpretations. Jesus tells these stories because they make us think; they slide in sideways into our hearts. A good story does that. So this parable has spiritual meanings, but also economic ones. What does it tell us about God, and about how to do what is right and just here on earth?

This parable gives us a glimpse into the generosity of God. God just says, This is the way I operate. Get used to it. Jesus had said earlier in Matthew's Gospel, I desire mercy, not sacrifice (Matthew 9:13). I go beyond legal regulations. I go beyond human merit. And I must say I am so glad God is not fair with me; God is merciful. I'm not sure where I'd be if God were just fair.

I wonder if this really should be called, not the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, but the Parable of the Generous Landowner. God says, If I had my way, everybody would get what he or she needed. If I had my way, all creation would be cared for! The Parable of the Laborers of the Vineyard is scandalous; it goes against what we think is right. God affirms the full humanity of those who have been excluded.

We are dealing with a huge question in this country about folks coming across our borders looking for a better life. I know this is a controversial subject, but what does this parable say about them? Are they the latecomers? What would it look

like to respond to this generous God who says, Everybody needs a chance for daily subsistence. No easy answers here, but how do we lean on the side of mercy, not sacrifice? (Matthew 9:13)

We are even given a commandment about this in the law of Moses: “Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin” (Deut. 24:14 and 15-NIV).

What are other ways to help people have what they need? The Oregon Legislature in 2016 voted to raise the minimum wage around the state in increments until 2022. They set three different standards for three different parts of the state that have different economic needs. By the way, we usually think of minimum wage workers as teenagers paying off their car insurance. But the average age of a minimum wage worker is 35. Almost 40% are 40 or older.

We as a state are saying to workers, You need more to get by. I know small businesses were frustrated with this new law, and probably had to raise prices. But maybe that says that we *all* need to pay a little more so that people who work hard at low-wage jobs can get by. By the way, when people make too little to get by, they rely on the state to subsidize them, so we all end up paying anyway. In this parable, the landowner says to all of his workers, What do you need to get by? Let me help you with that.

This parable gives us a picture of a God we might not like, a God we might think is too good to people who don't deserve it. God just says, That's how I roll. God says, I'm concerned that each one gets what is right. God is concerned about the survival of the weakest. I think this parable ought to agitate us; it ought to unsettle us. That's ok. The kingdom of God is not going to look like the status quo. May God give us wisdom for how to act it out. Amen.