

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Proper 20, Year A, Matthew 20:1-16**  
**24 September 2017**  
**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

## **Introduction**

- It's always dangerous to refer to one's spouse in a sermon, but this morning I do so with the permission of said spouse...
  - This past Tuesday, Linda asked me how my sermon preparation was coming along
  - I told her that I had done some preliminary research on the Gospel text, but hadn't started writing yet
  - She then asked what the Gospel was, and so I told her—Jesus' parable of the "laborers in the vineyard"
  - She immediately responded—with some energy—that she *really* didn't like this parable. "It's so unfair," she said. "I get the mercy thing, but it's just not fair how the landowner treats those laborers."
- I wonder how many of us might agree with her? And indeed, if we see the landowner as representing God in some way, fairness becomes an especially urgent question.
  - But her conclusion also begs the question about 1) what the point of the parable, from Jesus' point of view, actually is, and 2) *if* it's about fairness, how we understand what *counts* as fair—that is, what *criteria* should we use to judge whether an action is fair or not

## **Background**

- We've discussed parables before. To reiterate briefly...
  - There's an on-going debate about whether they were ever intended by Jesus to be interpreted as *allegories*, in this case with landowner representing God and the vineyard Israel—allegories have hidden messages that require a "key" to understand them—or, perhaps they're more like Zen *koans*—short, pithy sayings or stories that challenge conventional views of the world or our situation in the world
  - Of course, in at some cases, they could be both—allegorical and challenging—and, in the end, I believe ours today could be both

- Then, of course there's the fact that we read these parables in *translation* and *embedded in a larger story* being told about Jesus by the authors of the Gospels—authors who used the material they received from Jesus to address their own concerns and who thus might have suggested a different way of looking at the parable than Jesus originally intended
  - So, given all this, some quick observations from Amy-Jill Levine in her book *Short Stories by Jesus* (interestingly, a *Jewish New Testament* scholar),
    - She repeatedly cautions us about how we title parables
      - The way I've titled our parable this morning puts the attention on the laborers and on their workplace, the vineyard
        - But Jesus didn't use titles for his parables that we know of
      - Her concern is that titles direct our attention in certain ways
        - For example, she argues that we could easily title this parable the "Conscientious Boss" (unless, like Linda, we believe he might *not* have been conscientious at all) or "How to Prevent Peasants from Unionizing"
        - Anyway, you get the point—we should not bias the meaning of the parable by how we title it
    - "Kingdom of heaven," as we've learned, is Matthew's pious way of talking about the kingdom of God—a kingdom that's actually not about heaven, but about God's rule on earth—as Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer
    - "Landowner" is probably better translated as householder and, later, "the owner of the vineyard," is better translated as "lord of the vineyard"—householder may weaken the allegorical connection to God and, perhaps paradoxically, lord of the vineyard may strengthen it
    - And, those said to be "standing idle" is probably better translated as those "without work"—a much less judgmental way of the viewing the workers

## The Parable

- So, with all that being said, let's jump right into the parable...
  - A householder has a vineyard that's needs attention, and he goes out early in the morning (6 AM) to hire day-laborers to do the work
    - Before they begin, they agree with the householder on the "usual daily wage"—in the original Greek, a denarius, which is believed to have been enough to feed a family for 3-6 days
    - Levine points out that the Jewish Mishnah—centuries of commentary on the commentary on the Torah—has similar stories in it, and there some Rabbis argue that it is entirely proper for a householder to pay the usual daily wage—that is, local custom was to guide their choice of criteria about fairness—and that it was proper for workers to associate in guilds and for the guilds to set the wages for a local area
      - So, the householder in the parable need not be seen as exploiting the laborers and the laborers need not be seen as those who were radically poor or marginalized—their pay, Levine suggests, "was fair, but not exorbitant" (207)—but, was it fair?...let's hold that question
  - Things begin to take a surprising turn when, at the "third hour" (9 AM), the householder goes to find other workers standing there without work—he offers them immediate employment and sends them into the vineyard, promising to pay them "whatever is just"
    - At the least, we can say Linda seemed to be right to focus on the issue of fairness, though at this point we still don't know what finally counts as fair treatment in the parable...
  - In any case, things become even more strange when the householder does the same thing at the sixth, the ninth, and again at the eleventh (noon, 3 PM and 5 PM).
    - Levine points out that his actions suggest either the householder is 1) "clueless" about the number of workers he needs, 2) he has an insufficient number of workers [to get the job done in time]..., or 3) he has another "agenda" (209).
    - With Jesus telling the story, we suspect the last option is the case, but what that agenda is remains a mystery to us at this point

- Finally, things come to head at the end of the day, when the laborers line up to be paid—beginning, perhaps strangely, with the last hired
  - They get paid a full day’s wage—a denarius—which leads those hired first to speculate that they might get paid more
  - But, of course, we know they don’t—they get paid what they had originally agreed to, a denarius—and so, we are told, they begin to grumble
    - But what is their complaint? “...you have made them *equal to us*”—the householder treated them all the same even though some did more work than the others
- So, was the householder being fair or not?
  - Here, I need to put on my “ethicist hat,” for there are many ways to understand fairness and some of them conflict
    - Fairness could be based on *effort* or even *results*, so that more hours worked would presumably result in more pay, or vice versa—I suspect this is Linda’s concern
    - But fairness could also be based on a *contract* that is entered freely—the first got what they agreed to at the beginning of the work day and, presumably, at that point they viewed their “usual daily wage” as fair
    - But fairness could also be understood as treating everyone *equally*—the very thing the first laborers object to, being treated equal to those who come later—they don’t want to be treated equally, they want to be treated *better* than those who came later (Levine, p. 214)
    - Notice that the householder seems to be holding both to the contract notion of fairness and the equal treatment criterion—he replies, “Friend [he is being ironic here by calling him friend], I am doing you no wrong [that is, I treated you “justly” or “righteously”]; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?” He goes on to argue that he is free to be generous with his own money if he so chooses, and suggests the grumbling laborers might be envious of his generosity—in the Greek, it suggests these laborers have “an evil eye,” which Levine says may give them an excuse for grumbling—that is, it’s not entirely their fault they can’t see the problem

## Conclusion

- So, where's the challenge in this parable? The last line, "the last will be first, and the first will be last," it is likely not original to the parable and is thus not the original moral of the story. It even seems to contradict the story itself where all the workers were said to be treated equally
  - Ah, but in that time and place, the daily wage could also be seen as "living wage"—it was what was needed to keep a family in food and shelter from payday to payday
  - If the householder was paying everyone a who worked that day a living wage, then indeed the laborers were wrong to complain—the early laborers should have been happy for their coworkers, not jealous or envious
  - Again, at this point, Levine asks: "If the shock of this parable...is not that latecomers, allegorized as gentiles or sinners, are invited, where's the surprise? And, if it's not about exploited workers and despotic employers, what's the message? Maybe," she suggests, "Jesus's parable *has* to do with economics after all." (emphasis in original, p. 216)
  - That is, she says, maybe Jesus' point is that we should work, within the constraints of the local customs and resources, to provide a wage so that everyone has enough of what he or she needs—equal pay for, at least sometimes, unequal work
    - What does this sound like to us? The kingdom of God come to earth...
    - So the householder may, in fact, be allegorized to God, but he's also an ethical model for Jesus' followers—today, he might be compared to the owner of Costco vs. the owners of Walmart
    - If so, the final principle of fairness is one not mentioned yet—one of *need*, what people need to live—"...the point," says Levine, "is not that those who have "get more," but that those who have not "get enough" (p. 218).
    - In the kingdom of God, one works not for reward but for the benefit of all

- How do we feel about this conclusion?
  - Levine claims, “Jesus was neither a Marxist nor a capitalist.” Rather, he was both an idealist and a pragmatist. His focus is often less directly on “good news to the poor” than on “responsibility of the rich” (p. 218)
- Is that enough of a challenge for us? Do I even need to bring this conclusion to our time and place? It seems obvious to me—with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, with millions of people around the world going to bed hungry...
- And yet, Jesus was not naïve—he expected people to work if they could; but, he also expected employers to be generous in their pay of those workers, to provide them with a living wage.
- If that doesn’t challenge us, we’ve missed Jesus point. Amen