

“ARE YOU JEALOUS BECAUSE I AM GENEROUS?”

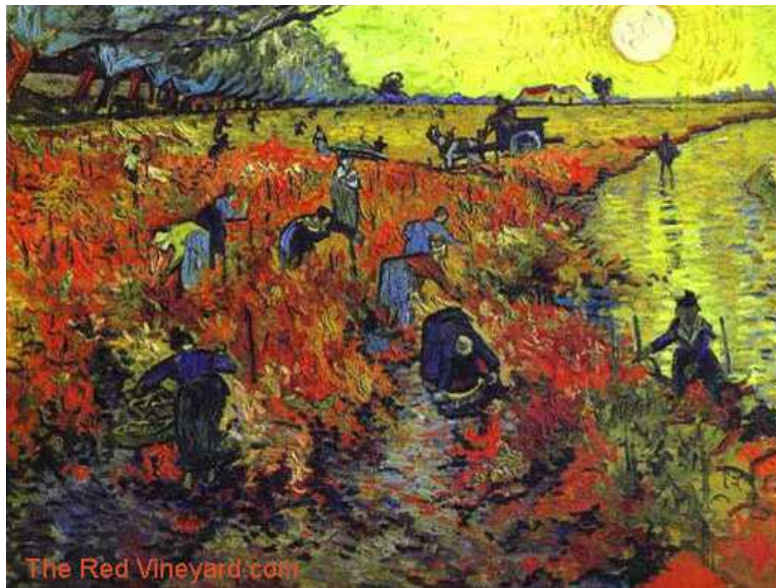
*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, April 17, 2016
Fourth Sunday of Easter. FCCH, 9:00 a.m. HCC, 10:30 a.m.
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 (*NRSV*)

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

Matthew 20:1-15 (*NRSV, slightly adapted*)

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “The kingdom of heaven is like this. There was a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 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?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 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.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.’ 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? 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 jealous because I am generous?’”



Vincent van Gogh, "The Red Vineyard"



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, "Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard"

In a sermon on today's text from Matthew's Gospel, Barbara Brown Taylor recalls her childhood experience of lining up with other children outside a movie theater on a warm summer's day:

“Our parents would drop us off in the heat of the afternoon, giddy at the prospect of a couple hours' peace and quiet. We stood in the shade of the awning outside and waited for the box office to open, our dollar bills burning holes in our pockets as we debated the economics of popcorn versus Junior Mints or Milk Duds.

“We were loud and boisterous, standing so close together that we could smell each other—that damp, healthy smell that children give off in the summertime. Our friends would arrive and we would shout their names, motioning them to come over to the places we had saved for them. The children behind us would complain bitterly, and so would we when the same thing happened in front of us, but it was all part of the game.

“Where every one of us wanted to be was right up there at the front of the line. That was the best place to be, not only because you were the first inside, but because you were there when the moment came, when the doors were unlocked, and the timid-looking manager pushed them open, so that a great wave of cold air rolled out of the dark theatre and hit you like a blast from the Arctic, an icy promise of everything that waited for you inside. That was the moment everyone waited for, and those who had won places at the front of the line got the very best of it.

“I cannot imagine anything more disheartening,” she continues, “than if the manager had come outside and reversed the order, telling those of us at the front of the line to stay put while he invited those at the end of the line—those who had just arrived, those who were not even hot yet from standing in the sun—while he invited them to enter the theatre first....On what grounds would anyone dare reverse the order?”¹

Indeed. On what grounds would anyone dare reverse the order of fairness? And yet, this is precisely what the landowner in Jesus' parable has done. He has reversed the order of fairness. And what's his justification for this reversal? “I'm allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me.”

This wealthy landowner has gone out several times in person to the village square to hire day laborers to work in his vineyard. Some of those he hired work for twelve hours, some for nine, some for six, some for three, and some for only one hour. But at the end of the day they all receive the same pay: a day's wage for as little as an hour's work.

I invite us this morning to enter into this parable as one of the various day laborers, bringing with us our common assumptions about work and pay and fairness. We assume that in any workplace setting, fairness requires equal pay for equal work. We assume that it's wrong for an employer to give unequal pay for equal work. If you and I are doing the same work for the same amount of

¹Barbara Brown Taylor, “Beginning at the End: Matthew 20:1-16,” in *The Seeds of Heaven – Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: WJK, 2004), 101-2.

time, we should get the same pay. If you and I are not paid by the hour, but on the basis of units of production, we should be paid the same amount per unit.

Many years ago, I spent part of a summer raking blueberries in downeast Maine. All of us who raked blueberries got paid \$2.00 for a half-bushel box, as I recall. Even though some blueberry rakers earned more money each day than I did, because they raked more blueberries than I did, we were all treated fairly by the landowner.

Most of the blueberry rakers in Maine were native peoples, some from Maine, others from the maritime provinces of Canada. All of us were like the day laborers in Jesus' parable. We could rake blueberries as long as there was a harvest to be gotten in. And the more rakers there were, the better it was for the landowner, who could get more blueberries harvested at the peak of ripeness.

The day laborers in Jesus' story were on the second lowest rung of the economic ladder. They weren't far from the lowest rung, which was occupied by beggars. These day laborers might once have been subsistence farmers, growing just enough food to feed their families. But their small farms had been bought up by wealthy landowners, who used their land to grow wine grapes and make wine, which was more profitable than grains or vegetables.

These subsistence farmers who had lost their small plots of land to wealthy landowners were reduced to gathering early in the morning in the town square, not knowing from one day to the next if there would be work available for them. So even though they might have resented these wealthy landowners, they had no choice but to work for them when the opportunity was offered.

For their part, the wealthy landowners were dependent on the very people they had disenfranchised to work their fields or vineyards when the harvest was ready. Two socio-economic groups who didn't like each other were still dependent on each other.

For the workers hired at the break of day, the injustice of losing their land and their dignity was compounded by the unfairness of the vineyard owner's generosity. True, he kept his word to them, and paid them what he promised to pay them. So he was doing them no harm. Plus, he had the right to do as he chose with the wealth that belonged to him. He had the duty to pay what he had promised; he had the right to be generous; and by fulfilling his duty to keep his word and by exercising his right to be generous, he was harming none of the workers while benefiting many of them. Some of the workers got what they earned; most of the workers got more than they deserved; but none of the workers got rich. A day's wage was still a day's wage: not a whole lot of money. But still, equal pay for unequal work offends our sense of fairness.

Jesus' story is clearly not about agriculture. It's not about the business practices of the wealthy elite of his day. But it is about Jesus' radical understanding—and practice—of divine grace. We could understand this parable as the background for one of our UCC slogans: "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

When I try to hear God speaking to me through this parable told by Jesus, I usually think of myself as one of those workers who was hired at nine in the morning. I'm not first in line, but I'm near the front of the line. After forty years as an ordained minister, never having committed a crime, you would think that I've earned a place in heaven. Except that's not how divine grace works.

If the coin in Jesus' parable—a denarius, the typical wage paid to a day laborer—represents on some level a seat in the theatre of the reign of God, it suggests that every seat in this theatre is equal. There are no obstructed view seats in the theatre of the reign of God. If this coin represents in some way God's grace, it suggests that divine grace is the same for everyone who receives it. “Divine grace is a great equalizer which rips away presumed privilege and puts all recipients on a par.”²

Divine grace, at least as Jesus understood and practiced it, doesn't fit at all comfortably with our typical human understandings of justice and fairness. But what if, through no fault of our own, we patiently hung around all day in the marketplace, and no one showed up to hire us? What if, through no fault of our own, we were last in line at the movie theater, and all the seats were taken before we could buy our tickets? What if we're not as righteous as we thought we were?

²Walter Brueggeman et al., *Texts for Preaching – Year A* (Louisville: WJK, 1995), 495.