

Not Fair. And Thanks Goodness!!!
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Matthew 20:1-16
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My Grandmother Margie used to give all dozen of her grandchildren a check for Christmas. The amount changed over the years, but it was always generous: enough to buy a new toy or other want. And she did the same for her grown children.

My Uncle David used to always get a kick out of saying to everyone: "Wasn't that a nice check Margie gave us this year? I just can't believe she would give each of us \$100!" Of course, his number was always two or three times the amount he actually received! And inevitably, a gullible niece or nephew would exclaim, "What! She only gave me \$25. That's not fair!" And Uncle David would cackle.

We all love to be the recipients of generosity. But it sure is funny how many stipulations we place on generosity. We want our fair share, and not a penny less.

Of course, the same goes for the contracts we sign, and the purchases we make. We acquire something we need: a TV, a car, a house, a hotel room, a plane ticket, a service of some kind. We do our research. We determine a fair payment. We make it. And you'd think we should be happy.

Tell me something then. Why is it that yesterday, as I watched the game on my beautiful flat screen TV, an item I paid a very fair price for, I kept getting annoyed by Best Buy commercials advertising TVs much bigger and much better and much cheaper than mine! And why is that every time I stay in a hotel room or travel by airplane, I can't help but wonder if the person in the next room, or the next seat, paid \$10 less than me?

And who among us hasn't happily agreed to a new job offer – finally the salary I need, the vacation time I deserve, the work-life balance I crave!!!! And then, a few months later, you learn that Larry in Purchasing makes five-grand more than you, and has six weeks of vacation, and he NEVER comes in early or stays late. And tell me, just what exactly does Larry do by the way?!? 'Cause it sure doesn't look like it's much!!!! It's not fair. They should pay me more!!!!

2017 sure doesn't feel all that far-removed from the vineyards of ancient Palestine, where day laborers belly-ache over the fairness of a full-day's wage for a partial-day's work. And bosses fail to dole out the justice and fairness we crave.

And because we're in a hurry, we'll take the simple approach and call this parable an allegory. God is the vineyard owner with an innovative, though horribly inefficient labor strategy. And the laborers are those saints and sinners who get their fair or unfair share. Be happy enough with God's generosity. Slap the bow the on package, and move on to the next chapter.

But just like last week, the parable from today's lection is not meant to be so straight-forward. This isn't a story of good guys and bad guys. And it isn't a story of diligence and laziness. Last week, Jesus lamented an economy that valued commodities over people. And it's more of the same this week. I

think Jesus offers biting commentary on where we derive our value. And how we distribute our resources.

Genesis makes clear our value – every person is created in the image of our maker; by simply being children of God, we have inherent and intrinsic value. When God creates humanity, the adjective used is *good*. And in conjunction with all of creation, *very good*.

Now I'll admit, I haven't memorized every verse of scripture, but where in the creation stories does it say God created billionaires and millionaires and middle class and poor? I'm pretty sure God created the resources. And I'm pretty sure humanity created greedy systems of allocation.

And Jesus says as much.

The phrase in today's parable that triggers this for me is "standing idle." In each sequence of the parable, the vineyard owner either notices persons standing idle, or asks, "why have you been standing here idle?"

The workers, of course, are waiting to be hired.

But I think they are anything but idle. I wonder to what lengths they have traveled just for the chance to get in line? I wonder how much their muscles ache, both from the walking and the standing? And I wonder how hard their minds are working, trying to grasp the answer to complex questions: "How is it I find myself in this predicament, unemployed and utterly dependent on the generosity of others? And what exactly will I tell my family tonight, when again, there are no wages to be had?"

In fact, today's parable conjures up images of the bread lines of the Great Depression. And I wonder, how could you call those any of those poor souls idle?

To me, the vineyard owner's question is the epitome of callousness, and shows an utter lack of empathy for laborers. Yes, he does offer employment. And that is noble. I guess.

But he's also one of the few with the means to offer employment. And he also profits from a system that doles out privileges based on wealth. And so the owner, not unlike the cotton-mill owners of the 1920s Carolinas, plays the role of benevolent enforcer. For it is HIS system that both generates AND ends idleness. And in such a system, he's the one with all the cards – the owner doesn't just determine wages, he determines their very existence. He owns every resource, and he can distribute those resources in any way he pleases.

When the owner asks the later workers why they are standing idle, I wonder if they think it's a rhetorical question? And quite frankly, I am surprised their answer is as tame as "Because nobody's hired us." It seems an opportune time for an expletive or two, or that the very least some snarkiness. And of course, the text never tells us what they say when the owner is out earshot!!!

And my assumption is that many of the listeners in Jesus' audience would have been day laborers. And my assumption is that, they too, would have understood the callousness and distance of the wealthy class. And as Jesus neared the end of his story, they would have expected this owner to be like all the others: dollars docked for hours lost; full wages for full days; partial wages for partial days.

So imagine their surprise, when this landowner, who appears to have the traits of his peers, doesn't do the usual. Instead of paying by the hour, he pays what's needed: a day's wage, which means a family fed and clothed and housed and provided for. And yet STILL, some of the laborers are unimpressed. We worked more than they did, but got paid the same! No fair!

You see, the system doesn't just affect the owner. It's robbed the laborers of their sense of empathy, too. Because the minute those early laborers become employed, they instantly separate themselves from their peers, who stand idle, still waiting, still hoping, still working to find labor. And all of a sudden, it's not their good fortune that has separated them from their peers, it's their hard work and diligence.

Last week, the King, the two servants, and the lesser servant were all trapped in a system that told them acquisition, and accumulation, and domination were the only ways to survive. And this week, landowner and laborer feel the same way. Play on an un-level field, or choose not to, but don't change the rules. And so the laborer grabs a number and hopes for the best. And the ticket-taker feels good, because he's doing what he can for the little guy.

But Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who doesn't pay attention to timesheets." In other words, God is a disruptor, and an agent of change, and a presence that isn't satisfied with the status quo. And if we are to bring about God's world, or the Jubilee, or the next Kingdom, or just one moment of peace – I really don't care what you call it – If we are to bring about what God intends, we had better be willing to accept a shock to our system.

Because in God's Kingdom, land owners don't just offer resources. They pay closer attention to how their choices and their generosity affect others. And they learn to pay attention to what role they play in the idleness of others. And in God's Kingdom, laborers don't spend so much time noticing what they don't have. Instead, they spend a little more time worrying about what their neighbors need, too. Oh, and by the way, the last are first, and the first are last.

And Sardis Baptist Church, I suppose this is the biggest question today's parable left for me: "What good is it to be first, if it means none of us are whole?"

Standing here today, I will tell you with certainty, that each of us is given value and made whole in the presence of our Maker. And nothing can change that, whether you labor twelve hours, or eight, or four, or one, or even none at all. And I have to tell you, that's an economy I want to be part of, even if it means Larry in Purchasing leaves the office before I do, and his TV's bigger than mine, and he paid \$10 less at the Holiday Inn.

Because I'm tired of trying keep up with the Joneses. I want to dwell in the presence of God's people. And bask in the enough-ness of God's provisions. May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.