

Reading Parables in a Pandemic, part 4
“THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD”

Matthew 20:1-16

July 26, 2020

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Introduction to the scripture: We know that Jesus’ parables use everyday things and situations to teach about the nature of the kingdom of God. In today’s parable, Jesus talks about work and wages; what could be more ordinary than that?

Read Matthew 20:1-16

We’ve been saying that the parables of Jesus read a bit differently in these days. I wonder if that’s because nearly *everything* looks different in the midst of pandemic weariness and uncertainty. This parable is about work, and work is certainly something we are seeing differently now.

Millions of people have lost their work, temporarily or more permanently.

Lots more are worried that this will happen to them, too.

For others, work continues, but now infused with new anxieties, ramped-up stress, and risks they never imagined they’d face.

All over the country, people are adjusting to working from home, or to major changes in their work routine.

Most of us whose jobs and paychecks continue feel lucky, and privileged.

Some are proud to be doing important work; some feel exploited and unprotected.

Of course, there are a whole lot of people feeling grateful that they are retired and not having to deal with all these changes to the world of work!

Our perspective on the work of others has changed, too.

We are humbled as we realize the risks healthcare workers undertake every day, for example.

We are noticing folks who are now being referred to as “necessary workers,” never mind that six months ago we didn’t think they deserved to make \$15 an hour.

We are appreciating perhaps just a little more how very many people whose work we depend upon:

Immigrant farmworkers who pick our vegetables,

grocery clerks we hardly glanced at before,

civil servants who deliver our mail and see that we get to vote;

aides who bathe and dress our elderly loved ones in nursing homes;

utility workers and plumbers,

trash collectors, line cooks, custodians, hairdressers, dentists, truck drivers and bus drivers,

computer technicians and teachers and journalists...

All these people – and lots more – with whom we are in a web of connection we take for granted... until something happens to disrupt it.

Work – our work and the work of others – has changed. Our perspective makes a world of difference.

Jesus' parable about work also can look quite different, depending on your perspective.

It's a story about five different groups of laborers hired by a landowner, at various times throughout the day, to work in his vineyard. The first workers start at dawn, then more begin at 9 in the morning, at noon, at 3 pm and at 5 pm. There is no explanation as to why the landowner goes out to the job center to hire more people over the course of the day. Some have suggested that the first hired couldn't finish the work or that the later starters weren't on hand earlier because they were lazy. But there's nothing in the parable to support either of those explanations. We can only assume that they all did what they could in the time they worked. At the end of the day – typically, sundown – they all got paid the same wage – the going day rate, which the landowner and the first group of workers had agreed upon. You may have noticed that with the later groups, he merely says "I'll pay you what is right" or, to the last group, simply, "go work in the vineyard." Either these workers are desperate for some work or they trust this vineyard owner.

It's interesting that we don't hear how the last-hired, or for that matter any of those hired mid-day, react to the generous pay they receive. I really wanted to know that, but this is *Jesus'* story, and he zeros in on the workers whose reaction he knows we really need to contemplate.

When the workers who worked all day see that those hired last get the full daily wage, they expect that they will get more. After all, they worked longer, in the heat of the day. When they realize that they are all getting the same pay, they get quite upset.

I'd guess that most of us have no trouble seeing their point. We have a clear idea of what is fair, and this doesn't quite meet it. It's deeply ingrained in us that hard work, or dedication, or worthiness, or being first in line entitles one to rewards. We really don't like it when people who are undeserving get something as good as we get. And, of course, the unspoken assumption is that we think we know, and should get to decide, who is and isn't deserving.

That's what's going on with Jesus' disciples, too. (You can see this if you glance back into the end of chapter 19, just before the part we read.) His disciples love Jesus' teaching, his compassion for the people, the hope of God's kingdom he's brought into their lives. They're glad to be his followers... only they want to make sure they're going to get proper credit for signing up early.

With this parable, Jesus tells them that the kingdom of God doesn't work like that.

The world may work like that – or at least, it does when it's working the way we think it should work. We think we should be able to calculate fairness, evaluate worthiness, assign status and seniority and priority. But God figures differently than we do. Like many of Jesus' kingdom parables, this story portrays the kingdom of God as a reversal of expectations.

Matthew –the only gospel writer to include this parable – probably chooses to tell it specifically to emphasize that the Gentile converts to Christianity have the same standing and value in the sight of God as the first Jewish followers of Jesus.

In the parable, no explanation is provided for the decision about the wages except for generosity. We want to know more. Does the landowner perhaps understand that all the workers need the full days wage to eat that day? Is he aware of extra burden and greater needs in the lives of those later-arrived workers? Is he grateful to have found more workers mid-day? But apparently these questions don't really get at it. The reasons simply lie with the landowner. He is free to be generous where he chooses. All the workers got a fair wage for the day. Can't the first group be glad for the others?

That's a challenge we really have to wrestle with. It's hard. The radical grace of God is disturbing to us. It demands a shift in perspective. Flannery O'Connor wrote, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." (p. 126)

The parable of the workers pushes us to look within and examine our own hearts. It invites us to reconsider the ways we make comparisons, calculate worthiness, look for rewards, judge others. It invites us, in fact, to understand that this isn't about us at all, but about the character of God. It invites us to welcome God's lavish generosity even to those who have not followed Jesus as long as we have, haven't made the kinds of contributions or sacrifices we have made, haven't worked as hard, haven't been as respected or as well-behaved. And you know what? In the end, to do so is to also release *ourselves*. Because to welcome God's generosity lavished on others is to be able to open our *own* hearts to that generous love ... AND to begin to live life in that same spirit of grace. (p. 126)

We sometimes define a parable as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" – and that does describe this parable. Jesus isn't really talking about work and pay, is he? He's talking about the full inclusion of all believers in the kingdom of God, about the love of God embracing all equally – lifelong saints and those whose journey into faith takes the long way around, stumbling at every step.

But... it's kind of interesting how the spiritual meaning circles back on itself to the ordinary, everyday world of Jesus' down-to-earth stories themselves,
his listeners lives,
our own experiences.

Because if we come to grips with our own ungenerous impulses, our instinct for calculating what's "fair and not a bit more," our readiness to judge... that is going to affect how we look at the "earthy" realities, too, isn't it? If we truly let the generosity of God wash through us... that is going to change how we think, how we live.

Maybe it makes us rethink our ideas about who "deserves" a living wage, or health care, or shelter.

Maybe we ask ourselves why “enough” or “more than enough” often *isn’t* enough for us.

Maybe we begin to question the way we so easily equate salary with worth, and productivity with respect.

Maybe in realizing God’s love for us, we discover that we want something more meaningful from our work than just “getting back” to the pre-pandemic routine.

Maybe we will start looking for more ways (and more creative ways) to be generous and to practice grace.

Maybe we will learn to see the various burdens so many of our sisters and brothers are carrying.

Maybe we will begin to see those who have not been included or whose gifts haven’t been valued, and make a place for them.

Maybe we’ll start to wonder why it took a pandemic to get us to pay attention to these ways in which work connects us to others.

Maybe we will start to imagine a world - a society - that makes it a priority to provide for everyone.

I don’t think that it’s accidental that Jesus sets this particular parable in a vineyard. I mean, it could just as well have been a wheat field or a construction project. But the vineyard calls to mind that Jesus said, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” (p. 124) It is a metaphor of connection, belonging, nurture. It says “the kingdom of God is like this.” We who are called to live our lives within the reign of God are the workers whose task it is to tend the vineyard, not with a view to personal reward or securing our own privilege, but together, with care and grace for one another, building the beloved community, following Jesus.

Resources:

Articles by George R. Hunsberger, Skip Johnson, Pablo Jimenez, and Patrick Willson in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, volume 2*, 2013, Westminster-John Knox Press.