

God Is Not Fair

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Matthew 20:1-16 — “For the kingdom of heaven is like 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 envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

It’s easy to think of Jesus’s parables as outdated. The scenarios, the characters, the plots—they all come out of an ancient, agrarian, Middle Eastern society. What does *that* world, many would ask, have in common with *our* world here and now, with our smart phones and 9-to-5 office jobs and party politics? Well, for me personally, this morning’s parable doesn’t feel outdated at all. I don’t know about here in New Jersey, but if you go to my home state of Texas and go to a Home Depot or Lowe’s store, you may very well see this parable’s scenario playing out right in front of you: people standing outside, work gloves in hand, work boots on, waiting, hoping that someone will come out of the store and want some help. This story may seem outdated to those of us working 9-to-5 office jobs, but as for the laborers in front of Home Depot and Lowe’s, they get it.

Let’s imagine that Jesus was telling a parable like this today and wanted to bring it a bit closer to home for us. Let’s imagine that a homeowner wants to screen in her back porch. She finds a handyman to do the job, and they agree that she’ll pay him \$500. It’s an all-day project, so the handyman arrives at her house in the morning and works through the afternoon, while the homeowner sits on her back porch, reading magazines, sipping lemonade. Around 3:00, she gets up and tells the handyman that she’s going to buy some flowers for the empty flower bed in her back yard. So, off she goes to the Lowe’s store. When she gets there, she notices a man leaning against the wall outside, with work gloves and work boots, smoking a cigarette. She asks him if

he'd like to plant some flowers for her, and he says, "Yes." So, they go into Lowe's together and pick out some flowers, and then she drives him back to her house, where the handyman is close to finishing the screened-in porch. The man from Lowe's plants the flowers in 30 minutes or so, and the two men end their work at the same time. So, the woman calls them both to the porch chair on which she's lounging and opens her purse. She hands a check for \$500 to the handyman, then pulls out five \$100 bills and gives them to the man from Lowe's. The man's eyes widen, and he can't help but let out a surprise laugh as he says, "Thank you!" The handyman's eyes widen too, but he does not laugh or smile. His heart rate speeds up, and an unexpected feeling wells up inside of him. "Look here, lady," he says, "does that seem fair to you?" She looks up at the handyman from her chair, takes a sip of her lemonade, and says, "Honey, it's my money, and I'll do with it as I please, thank you very much. If I wanna help this fella out, what skin is that off *your* back?"

If I were that handyman, I expect that I too would feel a little indignant, like something has gone wrong here, like *I've* been wronged, ripped off. I probably wouldn't say anything to the homeowner about it, but I'd probably stew over it for a while and carry around some resentment as a result. But if I stopped and gave it some serious thought, I'd realize that my feelings of resentment and indignation weren't really because I had been wronged. I got my \$500, which I agreed to work for, and which was a fair wage. So, I was upset not because I got less than I believed I deserved, but because *someone else* got more than I believed *they* deserved. Someone else got the same thing as me, when I believed they deserved less than me. Someone else was made to look like my equal, when I believed they should look like my inferior.

And if I did some soul-searching over this, I'd begin to realize that I don't have to think and feel this way. I don't have to be bothered because that person over there or those people over there got a break. I don't have to care about getting more or less than anyone else, about looking superior or inferior to anyone else. When what I have received is sufficient and just, I can be content with that, regardless of what anyone else has received, regardless of whether it was more or less than I think they deserved.

In Jesus's parable, the laborers who have worked in the vineyard all day long are complaining that the laborers who came later were paid the same amount as them. The landowner responds to these complaints with two rhetorical questions. First, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" The parable invites us to translate this question into the theological realm and imagine God saying the same thing to us. If we believe that the world and everything in it belongs to God, then we don't have ultimate ownership over anything. Every good thing we have is a gift from God—indeed, our very lives are a gift from God. So, this question—"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"—it challenges us to pause and think twice before we get angry about the blessings that someone else has received.

And then there's this second rhetorical question, right after the first: "Or are you envious because I am generous?" Plenty of scripture passages talk about God being a generous God, bestowing an abundance of gifts on all of God's creation. But this parable takes that message a step further: it

tells us that God is actually *so* generous that sometimes it will seem unfair to some people. It will seem like God is giving people more than they deserve. But in fact, friends, that is what God does! That's what the word "grace" means. When we say that God is gracious, we are saying that it is in God's very nature to bless us beyond what we deserve. And at various points and in various ways, God generously gives *everyone*—including you, and including your enemies—more than they deserve. So, this second question, and this parable as a whole, reminds us of the truth that we serve an extravagantly gracious, extravagantly generous God.

Now, it's fascinating to me that in the first part of the parable, in our first reading, when the landowner goes to the laborers standing idle in the marketplace, he says to them, "Go into the vineyard, and I will pay you what is right." That word "right" in Greek also means "just." The landowner is saying that he will give these laborers just, fair compensation. But that's odd, because most of us, I think, would say that the way the landowner compensates his workers at the end of the story is actually *not* just, *not* fair. Why should everyone get paid equally, when some did more work than others? It's a legitimate question to bring before the landowner, and an understandable complaint to bring before God. Here's my take on what God's answer might be: "Because I am generous. Because God's generosity *is* God's fairness. Because the workers who came later in the day needed that money to feed their families just as much as the workers who came earlier. Because I am a God who cares for the needy, a God who lifts up the lowly. And if those higher up, those who already have what they need and more besides, if they don't like it—well, they'll just have to get used to it, because this is the way things are in the Kingdom of Heaven, which has come to Earth in Jesus Christ."

Friends, as we move into the week ahead, let us ask ourselves where the Spirit might be leading us to be generous even to the point of seeming unfair. Amen.