

Generosity Unleashed
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 20:1-16

Imagine yourself at the Annual Meeting of the Corporation of Justice & Grace Vineyards. The C.E.O. is making her report to the stockholders and she finally gets to the part where she speaks about the company's labor policy...

"Fortunately during the harvest, we can find an unlimited pool of available laborers down at the town square. We take the vans down at daybreak in order to find the best people, and we contract for as many as we need for that day. If the work extends beyond our projections, we can always go back at 10:00 A.M., or Noon, or even the afternoon, and we can count on finding people who need the work.

Naturally, they are not the strongest or the most talented or they would have been hired already! Once, at the height of the grape crush last fall, we recruited people as late as 5:00 p.m. and they worked the final two hours until sundown. We paid them the same amount as the folks who had worked for the entire day."

"Point of Order, don't you mean that you paid them on the same scale?"

"No, I mean in fact that we paid them the same amount."

"Let me get this straight, you paid a day's wage to people who had only worked for two hours?"

"Correct, it's what the Owner specified."

Soon, pandemonium breaks out: "But that's preposterous! That's no way to run a business. I move that we censure the owner and hire a financial management team to come in and set things right."

Or let's look at it from another point of view...

Imagine yourself at the monthly meeting of Local #44 of the United Vineyard Workers as a sunburned young man describes the experience of working all day long at Justice & Grace Vineyards, and how just before quitting time the foreman brought in an additional van full of laborers in to help clean up.

"They worked a couple of hours max, in the cool of the evening and when we lined up to get our pay, those late guys got this big wad of cash. Then when we picked up our pay, mind you we had been there in that sun all day, we were not given a penny more."

An audible gasp sweeps the hall, and then shouts from every corner. Next steps are decided. The word will go out to boycott all Justice & Grace products, and begin a picket line in front of the vineyard with signs saying "Justice & Grace, Unfair to Organized Labor."

Jesus' parables have a way of getting under our skin. It's a little disconcerting that this is one of those stories that is supposed to tell us what the realm of God is all about. It subverts our values and turns our comfortable world upside down, it tests the limits of what we might consider to be fair. And like so many of Jesus' stories, if we stay with it, we just might learn something.

Think about the case against the vineyard owner... what really upsets us, what we have the most difficulty with, is his extravagant generosity. Maybe he appears at first to be unfair, but only because of his bounteous gifts to those who did not earn such benevolence but received it anyway.

Is it human nature to be more concerned about what someone else has than about what is in your own hand? The reality is that all promises were kept, all contracts fulfilled. Everyone went home that day with enough to feed their families. Is that a bad thing?

We've been conditioned to think first about what "I deserve" rather than what others need. Think about the basic economics of the market: people are supposed to be rewarded according to what they've contributed in time and effort, skill and value added.

But Jesus didn't know anything about the Dow or the NASDAQ, Fannie Mae or mortgage derivatives, hedge funds or 401K's.

He lived in a society in which the wealthy became wealthier and the poor became poorer. He knew that systemic poverty was no accident, but the result of inequality of opportunity, greed, and systems that benefit the affluent.

Jesus also knew something about God's economics, where things like dignity, justice, generosity, community and the common good are important metrics.

Have you ever been like one of those latecomers in the parable, receiving more than your due, getting something you didn't earn, finding yourself blessed in a way that was undeserved, surprising, full of grace?

And what about our opportunities to love and be loved? Did any of us earn that? Looking back over your life, who were the people who stood by you when you messed up? Did you earn all that love? Did the help and support, the forgiveness and care in your life come because you were better and more deserving and entitled to it all?

The economics of God's grace is the business practice of the church. When we baptize an infant we proclaim that the child's dignity is not based on supply and demand, but is rather given and secured by God. When we pass the plates and drink the cup, we serve one another as equals in the kingdom. And at the end of someone's life, we proclaim that human worth is not an earned dividend.

If you allow this story to stay with you, perhaps it will act as a spiritual counterbalance to this culture that tells you every day in a thousand ways what you're entitled to.

The next time some slick ad or political sound bite blatantly appeals to your self-interest, as if your needs are at the center of the world, you may also hear Jesus say, "*Now there was this vineyard owner. . .*"

And maybe next time, when we happen to drive by one of those places where day laborers gather, maybe we can look at them rather than look away? See them as persons with the same needs as ours. For they are the beloved of God, too.

See them doing the best they can in an economy that often takes advantage of them, and remember all the times we were vulnerable and needy and waiting anxiously and questioning our own human worth.

And when inevitably make those comparisons, you know, about who has more than we think they deserve...perhaps this parable can help us replace our envy and resentment with gratitude. Maybe it can remind us of the preciousness of every moment we are given and all the times when we stumbled upon an undeserved blessing, an out-of-the-blue grace, when all we could whisper was, "Thank God."

"Once there was this vineyard owner..." Jesus said.

I told you, Jesus' parables have a way of getting under our skin...where salvation really happens. Amen.