

Surprising Salaries  
June 28, 2015  
Matthew 20: 1-16

Our series on Jesus' parables ends today with the Parable of Surprising Salaries<sup>1</sup>, which usually goes by a different name: the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. It is found in the twentieth chapter of Matthew, beginning with the first verse.

"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.

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<sup>1 1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (HarperOne, 2014), p.199

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."

May God bless the reading and hearing of this parable, and let us pray. Generous God, help us to learn something of you and of your realm through this morning. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I have never owned a vineyard. Comparatively, I have much more experience with day laborers.

- On a few occasions I have hired a couple of day laborers to assist me with a project.
- For many years I drove by a very large gathering of day laborers every morning on my way to work.
- And, I listened to many of their stories while trying to determine their eligibility for food stamps when I was a caseworker and supervisor for a government agency.

As a caseworker I was required to document a family's financial situation in great detail. I had to determine exactly how much income they had and from what sources it was derived and then had to explain how that covered their expenses. Often when the income was very low or non-existent yet they told me about paying some money for rent and other basic necessities, I had to ask the origin of that money. The most common answers were from a family member who was helping them out or from odd jobs when work could be found.

While it was difficult for me to budget their likely future income based on their recent sporadic paid work in the recent past, it was far more difficult for those families to manage their finances and to stretch their very limited income to support their families.

Whatever your opinion is about day laborers, I trust that you recognize it is the kind of work that is dependent on the generosity of another. If an employer isn't inclined to offer you work, then you are left with nothing to do.

This is consistent with one of the more common approaches to the parable. Throughout much of Christian history people have read this parable allegorically.

The vineyard owner is always God.

- With one approach the earliest hired laborers are the faithful Jews and the later hires are Gentiles.
- With another approach, more helpful in our twenty-first century world, the times the workers are welcomed into the work of the kingdom correspond to our stage in life. Some enter in as children, others in young adulthood and still others near the end of life.<sup>2</sup>

With both approaches we are reminded of the same lesson: no matter who you are or when on life's journey you chose to follow the Way, you are welcome in God's realm. God shows no partiality. God is exceedingly generous.

While those spiritual meanings may be helpful, the parable ought to speak directly without the need for allegory. What if the landowner is really that – a human vineyard owner? What if the day laborers are really that – people making their living through day laboring?

Within this framework the parable's emphasis on generosity is perhaps even more obvious. As first world people who are financially well to do – at least in comparison to most of the world – we quickly identify with the landowner.

- We give the workers who put in long hours in our vineyard a full day's wages because it is fair and it is what we agreed to when hiring them.
- We give the workers who worked only an hour or a few hours a full day's wages because it is right and we believe in paying a living wage even or perhaps especially when doing so is seen as being generous.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Lischer. *Interpretation: Reading the Parables* (Westminster John Knox, 2014), p.85.

<sup>3</sup> Levine, p.218-19.

Jesus is teaching us about the realm of God. It is a place where things work quite differently than they do in the realm of Florida or even America - even as we see signs of hope and progress.

Our country is in a season of change unlike any I have ever seen before. I give thanks for many of the changes happening all around us. I never imagined that in such a short time we would see

- the removal of racist flags from state capitols and store shelves,
- the affirmation of the affordable care act and celebration of its success in helping insure more Americans,<sup>4</sup>
- the affirmation of housing non-discrimination that clarifies that discrimination need not be intentional to be illegal,<sup>5</sup>
- and the full embrace of marriage equality as our national norm.<sup>6</sup>

Friends, these are wonderful advancements and healthy steps forward. They are not, however, enough. Jesus' parable for us this day is calling us to more.

John Dominic Crossan, one of the foremost historical Jesus scholars of our time, believes my last remark about meaning is correct: we should be generous employers – whether of day laborers or others. We should be difference makers in our personal employer-employee relationships. We should not, however, assume that that is adequate. We need to take the next step and address structural or systemic issues that limit the ability of many in our midst to earn a living wage.<sup>7</sup>

Generosity is essential. We have a generous God. We are called to be a generous people.

Let us commit to do our part to help our nation move from an era when a day's work does not provide enough pay for many of our laborers to a season when a day's work provides a living wage for all laborers.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See SCOTUS decision in King v. Burwell [http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-114\\_qol1.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-114_qol1.pdf)>

<sup>5</sup> See SCOTUS decision in Texas Dept. of Housing and Community Affairs v. Inclusive Communities Project, Inc. <[http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/13-1371\\_m64o.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/13-1371_m64o.pdf)>

<sup>6</sup> See SCOTUS decision in Obergefell v. Hodges <[http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556\\_3204.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf)>

<sup>7</sup> John Dominic Crossan. *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus* (HarperOne, 2012), p.96-98.