

Part I

Do you remember your first job? The first job I ever had was one I made for myself. This isn't counting my household chores or things I did around the house for extra spending money. When I was about 12 or 13 years old, I decided that I needed to make some money, and so I started a pet-sitting service. I wrote up notes and put them in my neighbors' mailboxes, saying that if they were going out of town and needed someone to take care of their pets, I would do it. I would come to their house and let the pet out and play with it, then feed and water it. This was a great first job. My parents thought I was very clever for thinking up the idea, and were even more impressed when they found out that I hadn't set a rate of pay for this service, I asked that my "clients" pay me what they thought the job was worth. So when someone would need my services they would call me up and offer an amount of money, and of course I always said "yes" because I never would have dreamed of asking for more than they offered. Fortunately for me they were usually fair and I made more money doing that than I probably would have babysitting.

When I got a little older I felt that I needed a "real" job and I went to work for McDonalds. This was my first experience with working in the "real world", being paid by the hour making minimum wage. I enjoyed having peers to work with, and acquiring new skills, and all the things that go along with any new job. I've never been afraid of work, it's one of the things that my parents taught me from the time I was a small child.

Since that job with McDonalds I have held a lot of jobs with a lot of different employers. Some of the jobs I liked, some just paid the bills. Sometimes I felt like I was making a lot of money for what I was doing, sometimes I felt like the work I was doing was too much for what I was being paid. I'll admit, it's easier for me to work hard when I know I'm being adequately compensated for my work—and I tend to want to slack when I feel I'm being taken advantage of.

I think this is a very human trait, I don't know many people who don't work better when they feel they're making a fair wage. It's also true that it isn't usually a good idea for everyone in an office or a business of some sort to know what everyone else is making. Somehow, it just seems to lead to bad feelings between people who need to be able to get along in order to get their jobs done. Employers usually keep salary information confidential just for that reason—it really isn't anyone's business what someone else's rate of pay is- although, how many of us wouldn't jump at the chance to sneak a peek at what everyone else is making?

The owner of the vineyard apparently doesn't know that employers aren't supposed to be so open about rates of pay between individual workers. When it comes time for him to pay his workers, he openly lets it be known that all of the workers will make the same wage. Which would be fine, except some of the workers have only worked a half-day, some only a couple of hours.

Naturally the ones who have worked all day are angry: how dare you pay these the same as you pay us? We've worked all day in the hot sun, they've only worked a few hours. This is not fair!

Funny how eager we are for justice when it's our own interests that we're protecting. Funny how easy it is to see the inequality of a situation when we're the ones who feel slighted.

Part II

I found as I was doing background reading on this scripture, the parable of the vineyard, that there was some disagreement about the meaning and purpose of Jesus in telling this story. There were basically two points of view about this passage: the first, that Jesus simply making an analogy to the kingdom of God. In the first place, Jesus begins the parable by saying, "the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out to hire laborers...." Makes sense, right? Secondly, there is no evidence

that any landowner would ever run his business that way. No one, even in that time, would pay more of a wage than someone had earned. So goes this argument, quite a plausible one at that.

The opposing view says, indeed Jesus did intend this as a commentary on labor practices of the day. Matthew, the gospel writer, wanted it to sound like Jesus was only talking about the kingdom of heaven, so he made up that opening line. In reality, Jesus was very concerned about the power that wealthy landowners held over poor day laborers, and he wanted both the landowners and the laborers to see that there were other ways of doing things. Another good argument, another possible way of interpreting this parable.

I think it's probably more comfortable for most people to read this as a direct analogy to the kingdom of God, because when we read it that way it is full of good news for us. The good news in this passage is that no matter how hard we work we can't earn God's grace. Theologian Marjorie Suchoki says it like this:

“In the early church, the parable was taken as an image of the equal value between Jewish and Gentile believers... The parable is also taken to refer to the validity of the infant Christian community which, like its older sibling, Judaism, is now made a part of God's people. The force of the parable, then, is not a lesson in economics—unless those economics be considered the “economy of God,” which is salvation. The point of the parable is the boundless grace of God, which is as lavishly given to the new, the young, the culturally diverse, as to their older counterparts. Grace is not doled out according to our merits, be they status or deeds. Rather, it is provided faithfully to each and every person. Grace depends upon the character of God, not our own characters.”

This is good stuff, good, solid Calvinist Christian theology. We are all about grace by faith and not by works. And if that's all we get out of this passage, well, it certainly is something we need to hear—something that many, many people would be better off hearing and believing.

But there's something about accepting this interpretation at face value that begins to make the gospel all about ourselves, and only about ourselves. And I believe that when we do that, we're missing a fundamental aspect of who Jesus was and what he taught us about living as God's people in the world.

What if Jesus really was speaking directly about relationships between those who needed labor performed and those who needed work to do? What do you think Jesus might be intending for landowners and laborers to hear in this parable? That a fair wage is a fair wage, no matter what work is done? That a landowner is entitled to pay workers whatever he or she wants to pay them? That it isn't any of our business how other people are compensated for the work that they do? Or how about this: that it isn't the work that's important, but the people involved that matter? That what's important is that everyone be able to earn a wage that will enable them to survive—whatever kind of work they do, or how hard they work?

This concept, I'm afraid, is one that many people are uncomfortable with. We are more comfortable with the idea of Jesus telling the poor that they will inherit the earth—in the next life. We are more comfortable with the idea of Jesus telling the poor that “things” don't matter anyway—it's how you live your life that matters. We are more comfortable with the idea that you can pray a certain prayer, or give a certain tithe, or whatever, and you will be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams. In that scenario, it isn't that God blesses us because we are God's beloved creatures, it's that God blesses us because we deserve to be blessed.

A few years ago a man came out with a book entitled “The Prayer of Jabez”, in which he claimed that by praying a certain prayer out of the Bible every day you were likely to receive all sorts of material rewards. I used to have that book, someone gave it to me (in fact I got two of them when I graduated from seminary.) Now this sort of book makes me very uncomfortable, probably because of my Calvinist roots, because what it implies is that we can earn God’s blessing by praying a certain prayer every day. Some people might believe this, I just don’t. And that’s fine, there is room for lots of different spiritual practices within the Christian church. But what makes me so uncomfortable is that people like to use this sort of thing to justify why they are wealthy or have a good job and nice things, and some people don’t. We human beings—particularly those of us who have grown up as good capitalists-- are awfully prone to take material possessions and wealth, good jobs and economic opportunity as signs of God’s blessing. Which would be fine, but they also take a lack of material possessions and wealth, of good jobs and economic opportunity as signs of God’s disfavor. And they also use this dichotomy to excuse economic policies that hurt the poor and help the wealthy.

Now, I don’t want to paint poor people as “victims” of poverty. I think that’s more harmful than helpful, because it implies a powerlessness. But I would like to reframe our idea of who poor people are by suggesting that we think of them as the last of the day laborers that the landowner hired. For whatever reason they have been left behind by our economic system, in the same way that these last-hired day laborers were left behind by other landowners or shopkeepers who could have hired them.

Background to this story tells us that one of the reasons that the original laborers were so offended to receive the same wage as the late comers was that the original laborers were Jews, the landowner was Jewish, but the late-hires were Gentiles -- and they hadn’t been hired by anyone else *because* they were Gentiles. The economic policy of the other landowners kept these people from being able to work—even though they were willing. Rather than be happy that these people were able to find work so they could care for themselves and their families, the original laborers were resentful because they believed that someone was getting something over on them. Rather than be glad that no human being should have to starve because no one would hire them, they were resentful that the landowner was generous.

It’s so easy to worry about justice when we think we’re on the receiving end of injustice. Why were the original laborers not worried about these unfortunates who were not hired by any other landowner? Why were they not worried about the injustice of a system that kept Gentiles out of the marketplace, and gave preference to Jews in matters of jobs, pay rates, and housing?

It just isn’t enough that we worry about getting ours. We need to worry about others getting theirs as well.

To look at the story one way we see that God blesses whoever God chooses with grace—no matter what they’ve done or not done to earn it. God does this because we belong to God, we were created by God and God loves us as creatures of God. It is, as Marjorie Suchoki says, “in God’s character to do so.” To look at it another way we see that as Christians we are called to work together for economic justice for all people, not just those who we think deserve it or earn it. Sometimes, these people can’t or don’t know how to fight for themselves. Sometimes they just need us to walk with them in their distress. But we must do it, not because we think that God will like us better, or because we can earn our way into heaven, but because they are our neighbors, they are our brothers and sisters, they are human beings just like we are. And because it is in our Christian character to do so. Amen.