

Payday

Matthew 20: 1-16

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

It has been another difficult week, with fires and smoke on the west coast, and hurricanes on the east coast. People's lives and livelihoods are threatened. Even the air we breathe is too toxic. And this weekend is Rosh Hashanah – the celebration of the first of the year in the Jewish tradition. Israel is again closed to avoid a super-spreader during the High Holy Days.

Also this week, I had a dental appointment and I learned that increasing numbers of people are visiting the dentist with problems resulting from grinding their teeth, mostly at night. TMJ and other problems arise when we are anxious, upset, nervous, worried, and feeling like things are out of control. I get it! It is a stressful time.

As Dr. Frederick Cropp, a beloved former pastor at SMCC, used to say, “There is much in the world to make us afraid, there is much more in our faith to make us unafraid.” I invite you to unclench for a few moments here as we listen together for a Word from the Lord.

An elementary school teacher announced to her class that it was time for recess, and asked the class to line up at the door. Immediately the children jumped from their seats and rushed to get into line, pushing and shoving to be the first in line in order to get first option on the playground equipment. It was pandemonium. Once everyone was in line, the teacher went to the back of the line and led the class out the door from there to the playground. “The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” If you were first in line, you might feel a little cheated. But it had a lasting effect on the children. No longer did they rush to the front of the line when it was time for recess. What had been a fierce competition, became a much more civilized group activity, which was the teacher's intention all along — different behavior.

As was the story of the unforgiving servant last week, today's parable of the day laborers in the vineyard is unique to Matthew's Gospel. Last week, Jesus confronted the tendency to receive

forgiveness without extending it. Too often we aren't changed enough by the grace we receive from God. We don't become gracious and forgiving ourselves.

This week Jesus seems to confront a corresponding tendency to feel we have been wronged when others receive easily (even gratuitously) what we have worked so hard to earn. Our sense of justice and fair play are offended. It doesn't seem fair does it? Jesus confronts our jealousies and envy of others.

The landowner does not play by the rules. We have an owner (obviously representing God in the parable) who is so generous that he seems reckless. The workers who show up late get paid the same amount as those who have worked for twelve hours, in the heat of the day. It's not fair! It's a little like the student who shows up on the last day of class and gets an A. Or the employee who works for one year and receives full retirement benefits. It's not right – it's not fair. Our sense of fair play is offended. This parable is about the kingdom of heaven, not the best way to run a vineyard. It is probably “not intended as an example of proper labor-management relations,” according to one commentary.

On the basis of the equality of the exchange, we expected those who worked shorter hours would be paid less. Those first hired came to the conclusion that if one hour's work was worth a denarius, then twelve hours of work was worth at least twelve denarii. The first hired were angry and, according to normal logic, rightfully so. What seems to be generosity now appears completely arbitrary, and so they complain. “These last have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

Most of us probably read ourselves into this parable as those who have labored all day in the vineyard. We have earned what we received in life! Hard work and ambition are what gets one ahead. You need determination and resolve. We live in a world of competition. Our culture is one of earners. We track our hours worked, our tasks accomplished, our money invested. We spend lots of time earning — earning money, earning vacation time or PTO (Paid Time Off) as they call it these days. We earn grades, respect, even frequent flyer miles (though no one is all that interested these days).

I remember at the reception of my brother's wedding day many decades ago, one of my father's best friends commented, "These kids are beginning where we ended up!" He was surprised at the wedding gifts and the fact that they owned a home already. It took their generation years of hard work following the war to be able to buy a house. There was just a slight bit of jealousy or envy evident in his comment.

Maybe we should just spiritualize this parable so it's not really about us. This parable is really about those who first became Christians, and those who came after them because they all get the same benefits in the kingdom heaven. It's a twist on the parable of the prodigal son where the older brother was jealous when his worthless idiot brother squandered everything and still got that fatted calf. Many of the commentators take this more historical approach. Jesus is really referring to the Jews who first responded to the grace of God and now all these Gentiles are coming to Jesus and entering the church. The Gentiles are like the prodigal son and the Jews like the older brother. Or perhaps this reflects that the earliest Christians who suffered severely through the persecutions of the first century are now encountering those who are confessing Christ without having to endure the hardships of the earlier believers.

Even with a more spiritual reading, we probably read ourselves into the parable as those who have served the church for a long time. We have ushered, prepared the elements for communion, washed dishes, served on committees or as officers for years. We've taught Sunday School, stuffed envelopes in the church office, now it's their turn – those young people. "We've faithfully given to the church for decades and these new people think they can come in here and change all of this that we have worked so hard to preserve and maintain. How fair is that?"

The truth is that we are all eleventh-hour day laborers! We are all recipients of more than we deserve or have a right to expect. In any church there is always more work to do and many hands are needed. And generational hand-offs can be tricky and delicate.

The first thing to say to you is, "Thank You!" Many of you have served the church faithfully for many years. Our vitality today is a direct result from the sacrifices of many through the years. Your faithfulness and generosity have built this church. Your dedication and hard work

have been an extraordinary blessing. And many of you will serve the church for years to come, making sacrifices and supporting the many ministries. Thank you for how you have served in the past, and how you will serve in the future.

Isaiah said it long ago, "God's ways are not our ways." Jesus seems to indicate that unless we are willing to accept the reality of a different perspective, a different set of values, a different standard operating procedure, then the possibility of grace remains closed to us. If we insist on the equality of the exchange, we will not be able to accept grace. We will continue to believe we either earned it, or have to earn it.

Isn't that what Jesus is driving at in this parable? We must think differently if we are going to understand the kingdom of heaven. It doesn't work like our economic policies. God is not an employer that gives us our just desserts. God is recklessly generous and kind. God is like the landowner in this parable.

The kingdom of heaven is like that! It may not be what we thought it would be or should be; it may not be the way we would like it to be, but that is how it is all the same. Either we take what belongs to God and enter the kingdom of heaven by grace, or we take what belongs to us and go to live in a world that fulfills our expectations. But you better be ready for more teeth grinding!

In a time when so many millions of Americans are in the gig economy, and so many work as day-laborers, and so many millions have lost their jobs and the unemployment rate has skyrocketed to levels not seen since the Great Depression, it would be a travesty to only spiritualize this parable. It may not be intended as a "proper discourse on labor/management relations" but nevertheless, maybe we do need to rethink some of the ways people work and receive compensation today. None of the later laborers were promised anything except "I will pay you whatever is right!" They were not idle because of their own fault. It was, "Because no one has hired us."

Those of us who have worked all day may feel justified in looking down on those who no one has hired, as if it is entirely their fault. We're hearing more and more about so many people

from backgrounds different from our own who face serious challenges. We don't all begin the race to the front of the line from the same place. We don't have equal access to education and the means of production. Some don't have computers or WIFI at home. If you're a person of color, or recent immigration, you may be waiting all day for someone to hire you. Maybe we are going to have to think differently about so many others who are working in the vineyard with us. We may have to think differently about how we treat one another in God's vineyard. One thing is for sure, a payday is coming.

And yet, there may be reason for hope. George Packer suggests in a recent *Atlantic* article, "There are in history what you could call 'plastic hours'. . . namely, crucial moments when it is possible to act. If you move then, something happens. In such moments, an ossified social order suddenly turns pliable, prolonged stasis gives way to motion, and people dare to hope . . . Are we living in a 'plastic hour?' It feels that way," he concludes in his opening paragraph.

Not long ago there was another plastic hour. "The end of the Cold War has turned out to be not the start of an era of peace but instead an age of growing tribalism, and ethnic and religious conflict," according to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs.¹ "Region after region of the world has been reduced to what Thomas Hobbes called 'the war of every man against every man', in which life becomes 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.'" We see evidence of this all around us.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations in London. He was knighted by the Queen in 2005 for his service to the community and interfaith relations, and sits in the House of Lords in London. He quotes an Oxford Philosopher, who noted that "religious freedom was born in Europe in the 17th Century after a devastating series of religious wars. All it took was a single shift, from the belief that 'faith is the most important thing; therefore everyone should honor the one true faith,' to the belief that 'faith is the most important thing; therefore everyone should be free to honor his or her own faith.'"²

It may be a small shift in thinking but it leads to vastly different way of relating to others. We

See Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/06/why-hanukkah-is-the-perfect-festival-for-religious-freedom/>

2 Ibid.

now seem to be engaged in conflict throughout the world to determine whether that idea and the values it engenders can endure.

I wonder if there isn't another small shift in our thinking that might have large affect? It is the difference between optimism and hope. Again, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks provides insight,

How was it that Jews continued to survive? The answer that always came to me, every time I studied it, was hope. The Jewish people kept hope alive, and hope kept the Jewish people alive. And the word 'tikva', which is the Hebrew word for hope, is a key word of the Hebrew Bible. When Jews returned to, Israel, the land of their birth and belonging, they chose as their national anthem "Ha Tikva", "The Hope."³

Hope is different from optimism. One way or another for most of us, there has been some turning point where we have lost optimism about the future. Maybe it was World War II, or Hiroshima, or Stalinist Russia, or the cultural revolution in China. Maybe it was the pandemic or police shootings, or riots in the cities, or the fires, or the hurricanes. Whether it was climate change, or race relations, or the failure of the philosophical foundations of western society, at some point we may have no longer believed in the inevitability and limitlessness of progress and the ability of science and reason to solve our problems.

The death of optimism does not mean the end of hope. There is a fundamental difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is a passive condition. Hope is an active one. Rabbi Sachs says, "Optimism is the belief that the world is going to get better. Hope is the belief that if we work hard enough, together we might be able to make the world better. It does not require courage – just a kind of naivety – to be an optimist. But it requires a great deal of courage to have hope. No Jew, knowing what we do of history, can be an optimist. But no Jew, no believing Jew, can ever let go of hope. That is why, given that the twenty-first century is likely not to be an age of optimism, we really need an age of hope if we are to avoid an age of tragedy."⁴

³ *Covenant and Hope in Civil Society*, Jonathan Sacks The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, 2010 <http://dx.doi.org/10.3754/1937-8386.2010.31.11>

⁴ Ibid.

These are difficult days as we experience the birth pangs of some new way of living together. There is less reason for optimism but still great reason for hopefulness. "There are, in history, what you could call plastic hours. Namely, crucial moments when it is possible to act. If you move, then something happens."

Maybe it's time for a changed perspective. As eleventh-hour workers, either we take what belongs to God and enter the kingdom by grace, or we take what belongs to us and go living in a world that fulfills our expectations. We can choose between the upside-down world of the Gospel with its distorted view of reality that will skew our own perspectives or we can continue to grind it out thinking we will get what is owed to us and missing out on the grace of the owner. Our Lord died in the one world so that we might inherit the other one.

Let me conclude with a question. Are you a generous tipper or do you tend to be stingy and leave the minimum tip you can get by with? Next time you order out or maybe next time you visit a restaurant, leave a generous tip. God knows these day workers need it now more than ever, and who knows, it may just reflect a little of the kingdom of heaven into our time.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen