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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Sunday, September 20, 2020
Matthew 20:1-16

Almighty God, we ask that you grant us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the next, life everlasting. Amen.

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.” Parables are often baffling and this is a particularly tricky one, so it is helpful of Jesus to explain them. Or, rather, it would be helpful if this pithy little proverb actually captured the narrative message of the story it bookends. Instead, there seems to be multiple messages here...and the story keeps changing.

Yes, the workers come to the vineyard at different times, and they do get paid in the reverse order of when they came. Except, this great reversal that Jesus implies can't really be signified by the order in which they cut the checks, can it? It's a little underwhelming. Besides, if this is indeed the story's point, its characters seem to have missed the memo.

The landowner says to his manager, “Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” This is the early-bird workers' cue to get mad that the johnny-come-lately folks are being paid first. And they do get mad—but not so much about the order of payment. Instead, they think they should be paid more, not first. So the story abruptly stops being about reversing the first and the last and starts being about equality, and how people don't always like it.

The workers have a point: wages reward work – this is a time-tested system that everyone (those who hire and those who work) fully understands. Expectations are set. But this landowner has a different idea. And it's the equal wages he pays, not the order in which he pays them, that are the real scandal here. They present a serious threat to the order of things. The last are first, but the first are still pretty much first, too—it's an all-way tie. No one's material well-being is threatened; the threat is to the ranking system itself.

Of course, the workers do have to show up at some point in order to get paid. So it seems like the landowner should defend his wage structure by appealing to a sense of membership, of being inside. You all showed up! No one in this vineyard is last.

But that's not what the landowner says, is it? Again, the story's theme changes. He doesn't bother to explain to the workers how his wage structure is right and good. No, instead he tells them that it's none of their business. “I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you,” he says. “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”

This is the next surprising turn in the story. But if we look back, we see that this theme of the landowner's initiative is actually clear from the beginning. He is not a passive employer, reviewing applications that come in, hiring people who bother to follow up, and then letting them hustle for overtime and promotions. No: five times he goes out to find people – actively seeks them – and invites them to come work for a fair day's wage.

And, to our surprise, that's what this story ends up being about. Not a reversal of first and last, and not equality among those who come inside. Rather, it's about the landowner's choice and desire to give each worker enough to meet their needs. This is about God's nature. And here is the big hint that this parable is not describing a real-life situation here in our world, from our human perspective, but rather it is describing God's economy in His kingdom, from God's perspective. For the landowner to sustain this choice, of course, he has to have enough to give. If the landowner's resources were limited, the order of payment might start to matter after all. What if he writes your check last and it bounces? In a context of the subjective human economy of scarcity, it's important to be first. In a context of scarcity, there's only enough for some.

But this parable seems to present to us a very different narrative – a radically different context – one of abundance, rather than scarcity. It seems that within this context of an economy of abundance, justice and equality look very different.

As we walk through the world, we are constantly comparing and contrasting our lives with those of others. We think about ourselves in terms of being on a certain rung, with some people above us, and other people below us. This is understood in social science as the psychology of inequality. Our individual experience of reality is one that is necessarily subjective and almost entirely relative. We understand our position in the world as relative to those around us. We constantly compare ourselves with others that we come across in our subjective understanding of hierarchy. And we do this automatically, such that we are hardly aware of it other than when our relative sense of satisfaction is threatened by another's position or possessions.

A psychologist who studies the psychology of inequality relates a personal story when, in the fourth grade, he had his first visceral experience with the awareness of inequality. He was at school in line at the cafeteria. There was a new cashier that day and when he arrived at the cashier's desk she asked him for the \$1.25 for his lunch. That was the first time anyone had ever asked him to pay for lunch for he had always been on free lunch. But he never knew that because no one had pointed it out or talked about it. Previously, the cashier had always waved him on, but the new person didn't know how things worked and so she asked him to pay.

There was this awkward moment – the boy didn't have any money and didn't know what to do about it. The cashier knew that something was wrong but didn't know what. That moment of awkwardness made the boy suddenly realize that, "wait – some of these kids have been paying for their lunch all along, and some of us haven't." And all of a sudden it dawned on him why that was – that we were the poor kids who got free lunch.

He had never before realized that he was a poor kid and all the implications come with that. And then he started to think about himself differently. He started seeing his friends and peers differently. All of a sudden, this relative difference between him and the other free lunch kids versus those who paid for their lunch loomed large. As he reflected on this experience, he commented that it wasn't like he was any poorer after that experience than before it – nothing objectively had changed – but because of this subjective awareness, now everything seemed different.

If we look inward and reflect carefully, I think we all can recall a time when we had an experience in which our subjective awareness changed our experience of reality. Of a time when we suddenly understood our place in the ranking system. Of a time when before we felt fine, then suddenly we didn't. This seems to be one of the hazards of human life in this world. That we have a hard time with holding a truly objective perspective – that, as creatures gifted (and perhaps we should say "burdened") with self-awareness, we are then trapped in our own subjective reality.

This seems to be one of the foundational stones of our economy of scarcity. It is what leads us to seeing life as inherently competitive for scarce resources – it makes our life within creation to be a zero-sum game, so that the blessings of another somehow feel like a loss to us. But that is not God's perspective. That is not God's kingdom, God's nature. This parable suggests that God's nature is one of absolute abundance rather than relative scarcity. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" the landowner asks the complaining worker, "or are you envious because I am generous?" It is God's good pleasure to give to everyone who shows up – and everyone else he seeks out and gathers together – enough to meet their needs.

I suspect that God sees and serves our absolute need rather than our subjective, relative need. God's kingdom is not merely a reversal of created, human order but rather an inverse of the underlying subjective structure. What is important here isn't a context of radical equality (as in all are treated exactly the same way), but rather a context of radical abundance. Because of this abundance, the landowner not only pays a daily wage to each worker, but that the landowner repeatedly seeks out new workers to join. Over and over again, he went to the marketplace and called for laborers and brought them in.

So, I wonder: what if the landowner went out a sixth time, after it was long dark and the all the work was done? What if he took a bottomless sack of money and just walked around town handing it out? Would this change the story's ending? I suspect not. When the workers complain – not just about those who were only there for an hour but about these hypothetical others who never even set foot in the vineyard— wouldn't the landowner still reply that he can do what he chooses with what belongs to him?

Amen.