

THE VINEYARD

Scripture Readings: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Texts: Exodus 16: 4-5; Matthew 20:12-15

We human beings develop a sense of fairness pretty early in life. We are quick to protest when a sibling might get more than we do. We will cry, “Unfair,” when somebody changes or interprets the rules to give them an advantage. I am sure that every parent has been called “unfair” at least once when trying discipline their child—and you haven’t yet, be patient.

We carry this sense of fairness with us throughout life and apply it to all situations; we quickly learn that fairness does not always happen, at least on our terms. When we protest unfairness for other people, it is usually because we can put ourselves in the place of others and understand the unfairness to them. This aspect of empathy about fairness is the genius of the parable we hear from Matthew.

This parable is unique to the gospel of Matthew and we can detect that the gospel writer has used the parable as instructive to his congregation. The parable continues a theme the gospel writer used in the previous passage: the last will be first, and the first will be last. The gospel writer incorporates his own midrash at the end of the parable so that the parable acts like an allegory with the master of the house seen as God—even though the gospel writer opens the parable with the master of the house described in Greek literally as the “human house-despot.” The parable as originally told probably ended with the first half of verse 14.

If the parable does end with the first half of verse 14, then we get an interesting metaphor for the Kin-dom of God.

The parable begins in an open-ended way; we have no idea what time of year or what kind of labor is expected of those sent to the vineyard. The original audience for the parable would know that a vineyard could be a metaphor for Israel or God’s people, so they might view the parable as prophetic in the manner of Isaiah or Jeremiah.

The master of the house goes out early; that is, around 6 a.m. to hire laborers for the vineyard. He contracts with them to pay a denarius for the 12 hour day. We know that the wage is the usual pay for a day laborer and provides enough for the worker to feed, house, and clothe his family for a day. Not much would be left over for

pleasure—so probably no cable, internet, or smart phones. The laborer lived in the shadow of poverty.

The master of the house goes back to the market place at 9 a.m. and sees more workers standing idle. He sends them to the vineyard with the promise to pay them whatever is right. As we listen to the parable, we might interpret ‘whatever is right’ as a portion of the work day, i.e. $\frac{3}{4}$ of a day’s wages. So when the master of the house goes out at noon and 3 p.m., we’re still calculating: $\frac{1}{2}$ day’s wages and $\frac{1}{4}$ day’s wages. When the workers get hired at 5 p.m., we calculate $\frac{1}{12}$ day’s wages. So the way the parable is told, because fairness comes into play, we are thinking in hierarchical terms—it is only fair that those who work the longest should get the most pay!

When it is time for pay—did you notice that the master of the house suddenly became the owner of the vineyard—the last workers hired are put first in line. They are paid a full day’s wages: one denarius. The first workers are thinking like we are, hierarchically—if the last worker got a denarius then shouldn’t the first workers get 12 denarii? But, as we know, no, they get the amount for which they contracted.

Well, who can blame them for grumbling especially because we have constructed a hierarchical scale in our heads about what each worker is worth? The grumbling suggests that, “You have made them equal to us!” The master of the house (he’s back to that title) addresses one of the workers as ‘friend’ even though the workers had not addressed him by his title, “Friend, I fulfilled the contract—take what you were given and leave.”

Brandon Scott, a New Testament commentator, interprets the parable by saying the metaphor here really is about the vineyard, not the wages. If the vineyard as metaphor for the Kin-dom of God is the focus, then it is the sending of workers to the vineyard that denotes the action of the Kin-dom—we are sent to the vineyard to receive life, the pay keeps the promise of life going. But the moment we begrudge this gift of life in the Kin-dom for others, we have lost the meaning and connection to the Kin-dom. So, if at the end of the day, you have created a hierarchical structure about who belongs in the Kin-dom, you have lost touch with the Kin-dom.

I think the gospel writer has picked up on this meaning and applied it to his congregation. We know through Paul that the early church struggled with the question of who really followed Jesus better. The first generation of Christians felt that the second generation of Christians should have the same rules they followed before they claimed Christ as Lord. No wonder the gospel writer sticks to the theme of the first shall be last. The words of the master of the house, “Are you envious that I am generous,” would touch on the idea that the first generation would feel that they

should hold the place of honor over those Christians who came from a Greek heritage.

This idea is conveyed in the story that follows this parable where the mother of the sons of Zebedee wants her boys to be in the places of honor. When the rest of the disciples hear about this request, all sorts of cries, “It isn’t fair,” are heard. Finally, Jesus has to remind the disciples and us that to follow him is about servant leadership, not places of honor. We are called to serve one another in love just as he was. It is really about being in the vineyard rather than what we get paid!

The moment that we insist we deserve more because we were first, or smarter, or richer, or better in any way than others, we have lost the meaning of God’s realm.

Some commentators have shared the idea that in the world of the parable—1st century Israel—the workers who were sent to the vineyard later in the day would have those considered unemployable by others. These workers would have been the least in society: they were disabled, infirm, too young, or too old, aliens in the land, or perhaps even women. The master of the house doesn’t care, he just wants to send them to the vineyard. When the first workers protest that he has made them equal, we know that their anger is based on their biases and prejudices; it isn’t fair that these dregs of society should be given the same as us.

The master of the house wants to make sure that everyone—not just some—have enough for the day—he fulfills the line from the Lord’s Prayer: Give us this day our daily bread. Just as God instructed the Israelites in Exodus: take only as much as you need for the day—what we discover later is that those who try to hoard the manna, lose it. In God’s realm, all are deserving of life. The world was created so that all people can have enough; when we try to reconstruct the world where some have more than they need while others have too little, the world is out of balance and we have long since left the vineyard.

Are we, as the master of the house asks, envious of God’s generosity for all people?

Last week on “Travel with Rick Steves,” Rick interviewed David Lida, the author of One Life, a novel based on his experience as a mitigation specialist for undocumented immigrants accused of capital crimes. His work takes him to poor agricultural villages in Mexico, places we will not see on our vacations to Mexico. He described one village with two paved streets, mud houses with holes in the walls and roofs, feral animals wandering through the street. At the hotel in the next village, he watched a documentary on the shanty towns in South Africa and he thought those villages looked better than what he had just experienced. The people in these poor

agricultural villages are struggling just to survive—it is little wonder that they will send a son, a brother, a daughter, or a sister to journey through horrible conditions just so they can find a job and then be able to send back \$25 a month so the rest of the family can survive.

Considering that nearly 3 billion of our sisters and brothers in our world live on less than two dollars a day, we have to wonder about what is fair and just. God wants us all to come to the vineyard so that all can have what they need. How do we live as though we truly believe that God loves us all equally and created a world where we have enough resources for each one of us to live? How do we replace envy with generosity?

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