

Whose Justice?

Matthew 20:1-16

February 12, 2023

For five weeks now, we've been exploring the parables of Jesus together—these subversive, surprising stories that shift our perspective and reframe our responsibilities. And each Sunday, we've considered how the parables turn the world upside down and invite us to do the same. As my teacher and friend Will Willimon has written, "To be a Christian is...to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that we are meant to employ different standards of judgment than those that operate in the world." ⁱ

Different standards of judgment. A parable does just that, reframes our vision of the ordinary world. And each one, we've found, has a punch line, a moment of revelation, an epiphany, a surprise that shocks us (or even offends us), a twist, and a turn. Often the story is going along exactly as we would expect. Nothing remarkable. A shepherd trying to keep track of one hundred dumb, aimless sheep, and no surprise—one of them slips away and gets lost. But then, the punch line: the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to chase after the one. And in the unexpected, in the surprise, we see the difference between our priorities and God's desire for us. Different standards of judgment.

The turning point in this morning's parable is impossible to miss. The day laborers, they're all lined up. They're ready to receive their pay. Some of them—*some* of them—are exhausted from a full day of work under the hot sun, and others have just finished a single hour. They've barely even broken a sweat. The landowner begins with those who arrived on the scene last, and he gives each of them a denarius—that is the fair wage for a *full day's* work. Now, you can imagine the excitement that must have been building in the line as news travels from one worker to the next. "Can you believe this guy? He's giving out full day's wages for an hour of work. Just imagine

what we will receive." Those who had completed a whole day of work, eager for their just reward. And here is the punch line of the parable: "Each of them received the usual daily wage." Please note that what would have been an acceptable payment only moments before is now an outrage. Those who worked all day receive the same amount as those who worked for one hour. And then, Jesus says, "Oh, this is what the kingdom of God is like!"

He can't be serious. *That* is the kingdom of God? There's got to be a better metaphor.

I remember it like it was yesterday. A hot summer afternoon. I was maybe eleven years old, and my younger brother was five. We had shared a room since he was a toddler out of his crib, and we had shifted to bunk beds when he turned five. That morning when we woke up, our parents had given us our orders. Grammie and Poppa were coming to visit, and, to get ready, we needed to clean our room. Our room was a disaster zone. We both resisted the order, but the expectation was made clear to us. I, the elder brother... I, the dutiful son... I got to work. My brother—at least in my memory—did not. He lay in his bottom bunk bed taunting me. He played games on our Sega Genesis (the original Sonic the Hedgehog). I even remember, though perhaps it is my imagination... I even remember him playing outside, just outside our bedroom window so that I could see him as I kept cleaning. I protested to my parents. I complained. I cried. I pleaded with my parents, but I, the dutiful son... I, the elder brother... I kept cleaning, and eventually, thanks to my hard work and dedication, the task was complete.

When Grammie and Poppa arrived, we all went out to Dairy Queen for ice cream. My parents told me

that I, the dutiful son... I, the elder brother... I could order whatever I wanted—surely a just reward for all my hard work. And so, I went for broke. I ordered a banana split. The first bite was delicious, until little brother was also invited to make his order. A large Oreo Blizzard. *For what? How could they? No fair!* I still remember the burning in my ears. I remember how, filled with blinding anger, I took that banana split, and in dramatic fashion, at the trash can just in front of my parents, I dumped it. Meanwhile, Josh sat at the table enjoying every last bite of his Oreo Blizzard.

That is the kingdom of God?

You see how this parable offends our sense of justice, of fairness, of what we all know and agree is right? Along with those workers who came early in the morning, many of us read the story, and we find ourselves both mystified and perhaps even angry. Those people—*those people*—got something for nothing. A handout. They were taking advantage of the system. And with such a sense of entitlement, they just walk right up to the landowner and take a full day's wage for one hour of work. You can hear the grumbling...maybe even in your own voice.

"I don't understand why my hard-earned money should help those who don't seem to care whether they make it or not."

"Why are our dollars being spent to feed and clothe people who haven't done anything to deserve it?"

"If they wanted to make more money, they could. Just go get more education. Just work harder!"

Oh, the durability of these stories that Jesus tells. They still sting, don't they?

The early morning laborers are indignant at the injustice of their equal pay. It is no longer enough that they received precisely what they expected. The landowner gets it. "Are you envious because I am generous?"

And here is the key to unwrapping the meaning of the parable and its picture of the kingdom of God: The world is upside down. The landowner does not

claim that his action is fair. He defends himself on the grounds of generosity.

Titles matter, and they can be deceiving. Most of us know this story as "The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard." Such a title highlights the workers and the location. Laborers and vineyard. But lost in this labeling is the landowner whose action is central to the story. Indeed, Jesus introduces the parable with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner."

So, what if we were to rename the parable, "The Parable of the Generous Boss?"

After all, Jesus tells a story about a landowner who chooses to be generous, who wants everyone to have a place at the vineyard, who returns time and again to the marketplace in search of those still seeking work, who cannot abide the thought of anyone left behind.

And so those who had been waiting all day for the chance are given the opportunity to go and work. And not only that, they are given a full day's wage, which means they have enough to get by for one more day. Daily bread. This boss's chief concern is not the crop or the bottom line but the laborers themselves. And Jesus says, *this* is what God's kingdom looks like.

It looks like a justice that sees people, not profit. It looks like an open invitation to join the joyful labor of the gospel. It looks like radical hospitality for all who show up—no matter when *they* arrive. It looks like justice redefined by mercy.

Whose justice? God's justice, which begins at the end, with those who are most forgotten, at greatest risk. You know who they are. They are your neighbors. They are children who go to bed with empty stomachs. They are mothers who skip meals to keep their family housed. They are workers whose wages don't pay the rent. You know who they are because they are your sisters and your brothers.

If we allow it, this offensive parable can redefine our understanding of what makes for the good life. Often, we're taught to believe the most important thing in life is fairness, impartiality, just reward for hard work.

But what if the world is upside down? What if a life worth living is defined not by fairness but by generosity? What if followers of Jesus are invited to embrace this truth? Take it from the kid who missed almost all of a banana split. Our obsession with what we deem fair can spoil our joy, even corrode our hearts.

As we close five weeks with the parables, the question remains: Can we imagine a different world? Can we imagine a world that resembles the kingdom of God, where everyone has opportunity and hope? Can we imagine a different world where generosity is the default setting? What would it take? It would take a movement driven by compassion. Different standards of judgment.

Listen to this. It would take a church more interested in caring for neighbors in need than judging their worthiness to receive it. And we can be that church.

Much of the time, I wish he hadn't said it. But he did.

The last will be first, and the first will be last.

It is the ultimate parable punch line.

It is justice redefined by generosity.

And, if we allow it to be, it is good news...for all of us.

Amen.

ⁱ Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* (September 2005).