

Philippians 1:21-30 Universal Concern
Matthew 20:1-16
September 24, 2023

Our parable for the day is one of the more difficult of the texts in the Bible. It confronts us with an apparent injustice. Some people worked all day, some part of the day, some only an hour; *all were paid the same*. Even the parable emphasizes the unfairness, which turns out to be not only a modern concern, but is reflected here in this old story about the Workers in the Vineyard. Jesus claims on God's behalf the prerogative to be generous to the point of being unfair.

There are, of course, different ways of thinking about what is fair and not fair. Inequities abound. There are inequities of birth; talent, strength, intellect; and circumstance; wealth, class, citizenship, as well as of opportunity, access to resources.

And there are inequities of initiative; what a person does with what they have been given; how hard and smart they work. As this text implies, one is out-of-bounds to claim, "unfair," about all the givenness.

There are two sources of inequity; what is given, and what is earned, the work done for us and the work we do, and the compensation that accompanies it. And there is not a uniform set of rules to guide the outcomes. In this parable, this situation of inequity is used as an illustration of life with God.

The tendency is to want to interpret biblical stories as literally as we can, and we might feel like we are selling out to take an economic parable such as this one in an illustrative way. Literally, Jesus seems like he is asking business people to be like the vineyard owner, and pay the same for unequal work.

Equal pay for equal work makes more sense to us. At any rate, with the auto worker's strike and the strikes in the movie and television industry, we don't see anyone offering such terms or making such demands. I don't anticipate that anybody will. To expect such a policy, especially in the modern setting, doesn't seem realistic.

There must be another way to interpret this story. While this parable seems to be about fairness, it is more likely about *concern*; how do we assign importance to the people we encounter in life?

Proximity seems to dominate. How close we are to someone; the people we live with, work and play with, even worship with, they have a better chance of being important people in our lives. And the people who have done things, helped us, the ones we have helped; are more present to us than those far away.

It is not a human skill to have the capacity to be mindful of those with whom they have no acquaintance. That is the way it is among people. *But the question of the day is how God assigns value to people?* For God is to be associated with the owner of the vineyard.

For Jesus, people are important. *Everyone is valuable in the sight of God.* God does not play favorites. God is concerned about everybody. Human beings are not capable of this kind of concern. The divine sense of importance is both a challenge and an aspiration for us.

The first hurdle to overcome is that if everyone is important to God . . . then who we are and what we do, and what proximity we have, is less significant; and *that seems unfair.*

Author Karen Armstrong speaks about an Axial age in human history in which all the major world religions were developed. It was during this time that Judaism was forged out of the religion of Israel that preceded it. There were certain features of life that were discovered in this time; monotheism, The Golden Rule, a spirituality of compassion and empathy among them.

One of the greatest religious discoveries in the so-called axial age is called, “the law of *universal concern.*” That is what this story is about, and it is a challenge to us because we still live in a world where inheritance matters, and merit matters, and our histories, both personal and national, still matter. In God’s scheme, these things do not matter. It is fair and right that God should be concerned about everyone.

The alternative Old Testament reading this week is helpful and instructive. It is from the story of Jonah,

the part where he became upset because God forgave the Ninevites after they repented. To Jonah, the Assyrians were a hated enemy, and there was a delight taken from their prospective doom. He went to Ninevah preaching the gospel of repentance expecting them to refuse to repent and then he would be an eyewitness to their comeuppance.

When he discovered there would be no comeuppance, he became resentful. He didn’t think it was fair that God cared about the Ninevites as well as the Israelites, in the same way we might think it is unfair to give the same pay for unequal work.

The story of the New Testament involves a similar issue, the acceptance of the Gentiles, which corresponds to Jonah’s experience. We see it in the Feeding of the 4,000, the companion to the Feeding of the 5,000, but on the Gentile side of the lake; and in the encounter between Jesus and the Centurion or the Syro-Phoenician Woman.

And it is of course seen in the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles, which is a central part of the story of the Acts of the Apostles, and the epistles of Paul; Peter and Cornelius, or the Church at Antioch. the Gentiles are meant to be understood as those whose were hired late in the day. By the way, that means us.

Whether it is a matter of who someone is, or what they have done, we see Jesus and Paul as provocatively accepting of others, or should I say concerned about others.

For this is a story about how God assigns importance or value to people. Though it is a labor/management example, it is a message of God's overarching love.

One the one hand, it means that each of us is acceptable to God, no matter who we are or what we have done. Part of, and maybe a foundational part, of faith is to accept that one has been accepted by God; that *I* have been accepted and loved and forgiven, that *you* have been accepted and loved and forgiven.

And this acceptance is not based on the standing of our birth or anything associated with inheritance or with the givenness of our lives; and it is not based on anything we have done, not even the intellectual achievement of accepting the doctrines of the faith, like justification by Grace, through faith.

And so the hope, that we along with Jonah, though we struggle, might come closer to a divine understanding of the world and its people. The reality is that as a group Christians have never been able to achieve this ideal.

But we can believe in it, strive for it, and pray for God's help, as we also seek to be better in every facet of life. knowing that we are among those late in the day to receive generosity, because God's grace is universal, and extends even to us, for which we can be thankful.

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