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Thy Kingdom Come

“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us.”

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,[□] he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.[□] ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.[□] ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’[□] ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’[□] ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” **Matthew 20:1-16**

Like the parable that Ginger preached on last week, which led to our great discussion on forgiveness (Matthew 18: 21-35), this week’s scripture reading is also a parable about the kingdom of heaven. Matthew and his community were obsessed with this concept: What is this “kingdom of heaven” that Jesus was on about all the time? It was obviously important to Jesus; in the first sentence he ever uttered in his public ministry, he said “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17) So where *is* this kingdom? Is it even a place? Is it a “kingdom?” Is God a king or an emperor, like Caesar? When and how might this kingdom arrive?

Jesus struggled to explain the kingdom of heaven to his listeners, and we still struggle to understand it today. Think about it: We say these words together every week: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Thy kingdom come, on earth. Do we know what we’re asking for? What could this mean for us and what we are doing as a congregation?

It proved so hard, in fact, for us to understand what the kingdom of heaven *is*, that Jesus resorted to parables to try to give us a sense of what it is *like*. And so, the kingdom of heaven is like ... a mustard seed; it’s like ... a woman searching for a lost coin; it’s like ... a man who had two sons;

it's like ... a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves; it's like ... a rich man who seeks salvation. And here, it's like a landowner who goes out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

Now I don't know about you, but I have a few problems with this landowner's philosophy of labor relations. I don't think we would teach this approach to compensation at the Harvard Business School. The landowner says he's not doing wrong, but he seems to be violating not just logic but in fact our plain sense of what's fair. So, either the landowner is misguided or Jesus knows something that we don't, and this parable is the only way he can reveal it to us.

That second option is typically the better bet, so let's dig in and try to understand the lesson he's teaching us, and then step back and discuss what we take from this.

The story starts out innocently enough, in a day-labor setting that was as familiar to Matthew's audience as it would be to us today. A landowner goes out to the marketplace in the early morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. He negotiates with these early-morning laborers, and they agree that he will pay them "the usual daily wage," which at the time was a denarius, about a day's household expenses. He then goes back to the market several times across the course of the day, rounding up additional laborers and setting them to work. He even goes out an hour before quitting time, finds a group of men standing around, asks them why they're idle, they tell him that no one hired them, so he sends them off to work as well. At the end of the day, he asks his manager to pay them all, in reverse order, starting with those late arrivers. The manager pays the 5 pm shift a denarius, then pays the 3 pm arrivers a denarius, the noon arrivers get a denarius, the 9am shift a denarius, and finally he pays the early arrivers, the first shift . . . a denarius.

This causes consternation among the first shift, which Jesus describes as "grumbling," and it's worth it to be precise about exactly what is bothering them. They are grumbling not that they should be paid *more*, but that the late-arrivers should be paid *less*: "you have made them equal to us," they complain. They haven't worked as hard as we have! They don't deserve to be equal to us! The landowner replies that he paid them what they agreed upon in the morning, and that in any event it's his money. He can do with it as he pleases.

I read this passage, and I try to identify with the landowner but I have to say, I think the early arrivers have a pretty legitimate beef. They're standing up for what my former teacher, Matt Boulton, calls a "work-and-reward ethos." The idea that compensation should be distributed according to the effort and excellence expended in 'bearing the burden of the day,' as the early-arrivers put it.

Now pause on this: It is striking how much this idea that "you get out what you put in" governs our conduct in the world, our expectations. It saturates our everyday lives—not just at work, but at home, at school, in sports—even in our personal relationships. This is the way the world works, we tell ourselves. The way the world should work. This is, after all, justice.

You get out what you put in. No pain, no gain. "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work" is the founding motto of the American labor movement. Think of the earliest stories we read to our

children: “And the little red hen ate the bread all by herself.” She’s the one who put in the work, so she alone should reap the rewards.

And it’s clear that Jesus has constructed the story to focus us on this point—to make us share in the sense of outrage that the early arrivers feel. Jesus highlights the grumbling by making the early arrivers watch the late arrivers get paid. You can almost see the wheels turning in their heads as the pay is distributed from last to first: “Whoa, if *they’re* getting a denarius, and they’ve only been here an hour, *we’re* going to get 10 times that!” If the main point of the story were to focus on the generosity of the landowner, however, you’d reverse things, wouldn’t you—you’d go from first to last, and end on the delighted reaction of the 5 pm shift when they receive much more than they were expecting. You’d add some backstory to make their plight more real to us: They’d been waiting around all day, increasingly concerned that they wouldn’t be able to put food on the table that evening, until the landowner plucked them up at the last minute—at the last hour, literally. You’d highlight the mercy they’d received—and it was mercy. It was an act of grace.

Jesus wants us to understand a number of things about what the kingdom of heaven is like, but in particular he wants us to understand that it operates on a very different, apparently upside down, logic from the world we’ve come to expect. He wants us to disconnect cause and effect, work and reward, and replace it with what you might think of as “gift and gratitude.” God does not count hours worked. God does not keep a ledger. God is not an accountant. The principle on which the kingdom of God operates is not justice, but rather grace; and our reaction to this story illustrates just how hard it is for us to make this mental and spiritual adjustment.

What Jesus is doing by sharing this lesson in the form of a parable is to give us a window not into proper labor relations but into a whole different way of being and thriving: “the kingdom of heaven,” God’s realm of love and mercy. And he never meant for us to wait to live in this kingdom. He didn’t tell us to shuffle along here until we’re swept up in the Rapture and transported to Paradise.

Thy kingdom come, on earth, we say.

What does it mean for us here at the First Congregational Church that we follow a teacher who tells us that God’s kingdom—the kingdom we pledge each week to bring about here on earth—operates by such unconventional rules? The wisdom contained in this parable feels unusually timely for us as a congregation, as we set out to call a new pastor and to lean in to building that kingdom of heaven, of outreach and connection, here on the Peninsula. To be the “community church” that a lot of us yearn to be.

What does this illustrate? What can we conclude?

First, the kingdom clearly is a community open to everyone – early risers and late arrivers alike. I’m conscious that we here this morning represent a fairly exclusive gathering, or congregation—or Zoom screen—of early arrivers! We’ve been at this work all day. We have to develop the skills and the instincts to welcome new laborers to our little corner of the kingdom. This might well be harder to do than we anticipate.

Second, we need not just to welcome these new arrivers, we need to *celebrate* them. Lift them up and reward them as equals, as if they had been working with us since the beginning of the day. This is subtle: The teachable moment in today's parable is reserved principally for us, for the early arrivers.

Finally, this is a kingdom that operates on the principle of grace. In God's economy, we don't count and measure; we don't work and reward. We turn "us vs. them" into "we." This is hard for capitalists: From each according to their ability; to each according to their need.

It's a marvelous, exciting, bracing vision of inclusion and growth, not exclusion and decline. Grace and mercy, not justice and scorekeeping. A ministry to the most vulnerable—an embrace of the late arrivers.

So what might this look like in practice? Let me close by sharing with you something that we *do* teach at Harvard Business School, something that we call the "reciprocity ring." It's a good image for us to keep in mind as we think about what it might look like to build a community that operates on gifts and grace.

At the beginning of every academic year we face the same challenge: How to take 1,000 highly talented, highly competitive new students, from all around the world, and build them into a community. We start by sorting them into sections of about 100 students each, and then we go deep with them to discover and develop their sense of connection. The pivot point—the moment when we go from "me" to "we"—is this experience of the reciprocity ring.

Here's how it works.

It's based on the work of the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, who wrote the book *Bowling Alone*. Putnam teaches that the way you can determine the amount of social capital and trust that exists in a society is to gauge the amount of "generalized reciprocity" that society demonstrates. The propensity for members of the society to do things for each other with no particular expectation of reward, confident that down the road someone will return the favor.

The way the exercise works, we ask each student to take a risk—to share a *real* need they have: a specific, significant personal or professional need or concern. It could relate to a business they want to start; it could be an anxiety they have about a particular subject, like finance; it could simply be something related to moving or settling in. They're pretty reluctant at first; it's a big deal to be vulnerable in this world. To admit that you have a need.

So we gather up all of those individual needs, or asks, and then we go through them together, one by one, to see who might offer up the skill, time, contacts or resources to fulfill the ask. You get some obscure ones: "Does anyone know how I might reach Michelle Obama?" "Are there any machine learning experts in the section who can help me with a coding problem?" But there are simpler ones too. "I'm homesick for homemade pizza, and I don't have a kitchen in my dorm room." One of my students noted that the day we were doing this exercise was Chinese Valentine's Day, and he was feeling sad because he had had to leave his fiancé behind in New York City. He asked if anyone would email her to tell her that he was OK and that he missed

her. Out of 73 possible responders, 65 of us did exactly that that evening. He had tears in his eyes the next day.

As I watched this experience unfold before my own eyes, and as I watched the transformation take place in my own beloved group of students, I realized what Jesus meant when he said that the kingdom of God is within us. Within our grasp. We live in a world of boundless need and concern, and the unique role of a community church is to discover those needs and to meet them with generosity and loving-kindness.

Generalized reciprocity. Gifts and gratitude. Grace. What a marvelous heritage we share, and what a redemptive and important mission we are on together. Thy kingdom come, on earth.

Amen.