

Matthew 20:1-16: **Better Than Fair**

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY

24 September 2023

Let's listen for the word of God to us from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 20 (CEB):

[Jesus said,] <sup>1</sup>“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard.

<sup>3</sup> “Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ <sup>5</sup> And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. <sup>6</sup> Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

<sup>7</sup> “‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

<sup>8</sup> “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. <sup>10</sup> Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup> ‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’

<sup>13</sup> “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ <sup>16</sup> So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

Why’d I get the smaller half?  
Why’d he get the bigger laugh?  
Why can’t I have a pet giraffe?  
It’s not fair.<sup>1</sup>

That’s the start of a kids’ book called *It’s Not Fair*. We Americans, young and old, obsess over the idea of fairness, even though we constantly fail to live it out. Statistically, overall, white Americans have amassed far more wealth and income than citizens of color, but the perception among white folks is that the gap isn’t very big. More comfortable Americans tend to believe our society is set up fairly, even when it’s not.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosenthal, Amy Krause and Tom Lichtenfeld. *It’s Not Fair*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Badger, Emily. “Whites Have Huge Wealth Edge Over Blacks (but Don’t Know It).” *New York Times*. 18 September 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/18/upshot/black-white-wealth-gap-perceptions.html>

Other unfairnesses persist. I once worked for an organization where I discovered that I was being paid a lot less than other people doing very similar jobs. I felt resentful, and I tried to get the situation changed. It wasn't fair.

Labor movements and feminists and racial justice advocates uphold equal pay for equal work, and they're right to push for it. If everyone who picks grapes got paid the same amount per hour, or everyone who packs Amazon boxes, or everyone who teaches history, we'd be a little closer to achieving economic fairness. Equal work demands equal pay — that seems fair to us.

Then Jesus tells a story about a business owner who keeps hiring people at different times throughout a workday, and shockingly he pays them all the same amount: one full day's wage.

And we squirm. It's totally unfair. What kind of employer gives the same paycheck for one hour of work and for twelve hours of work? Actually a lot of our businesses do exactly that. Executives and managers routinely get far more per hour than laborers or entry-level workers receive, despite the injuries and exhaustion common in low-paying jobs. We justify this by deciding that highly-skilled or highly-educated employees are more productive, are worth more. More important work equals more pay — that also seems fair to us.

The other day at my neighborhood gas station I saw a person clearly in need approach another customer and ask for money. The customer yelled a brutal response I won't repeat here, ending with "Get out of my face!" as he slammed his expensive car door and tore off into traffic. Maybe this parable was working on me because I interpreted that moment as the driver saying, "I work hard for my nice things and it's unfair for you, an undeserving stranger, to get something for nothing."

Of course I felt terrible for the person asking for help. I glanced over and saw resignation on his face. But I can't just judge that angry driver. Shamefully, I felt relief when the beggar turned and walked somewhere else instead of trying me next. What would I have said or done? Would I simply have been more polite while also refusing to help?

We Americans, we capitalists, get intoxicated with the idea that work means *earning* something. Which means there's a tally, a calculation of our productivity, and a monetary reward tied to how much and how hard we worked.

But in this gospel parable the harder workers *don't* reap additional rewards! Does that grate on you a little? It's not fair. And Jesus says that the kingdom of God is *like this landowner*. Could God really be so bad at capitalism?

Well, yes. And thanks be to God.

This landowner's pay scale looks closer to a universal basic income. People he hired to work all day pick up their pay and get to buy food for dinner. People the landowner hired for part-time work get to buy food for dinner. People he found just in time for some late afternoon gig work get to buy food for dinner. Maybe the landowner is particularly generous toward those last folks. But he's also being humane. This landowner effectively feeds dinner to *everyone* who came out to look for work.

So the kingdom of God is like a vineyard where longtime citizens, the locals who have been working the land for generations, all get fed. This vineyard is also where single parents, say, or underemployed people, all find some work too, and they get fed. And in this kingdom vineyard folks who arrived in the last hour, maybe undocumented immigrants, *also* get to do honorable work and they too receive enough to get fed.

In the parable the last people hired are the first to get paid. When they receive more than they “deserve” you can imagine dollar signs in the eyes of the workers who started in the early morning. *Did you see that? Just think what we’re going to get paid!* But when the first who are now last receive the same daily wage as everyone else, their eyes grow dark, projecting bitterness. *But we did so much.*

The landowner gently reminds them that they’re getting paid exactly what they agreed to, and that the landowner has the freedom to pay whatever he wants to other people. “Or are you resentful because I’m generous?”

The Greek words there really mean, “Are you giving me the evil eye because I’m generous?” In Ancient Near Eastern cultures, the evil eye was a serious thing. People believed that malice, jealousy, and destruction could well up in someone’s heart and travel out right through their eyes, causing damage to anything and anyone the person looked at. You wanted to avoid someone’s evil eye at all costs.<sup>3</sup>

So the landowner asks those grumbling workers, “Are you giving me stink-eye because of how I’m treating other people?” As Mr. Rogers reminded us so well, underneath our mad is usually sad. Maybe those first vineyard workers feel dishonored or undervalued in comparison to others. Or, in that subsistence economy, they might fear that today’s overgenerous landlord won’t have enough money to pay them for work tomorrow.

“Are you giving me the evil eye because I’m generous?” The landowner’s question works on us too. If we perceive this as a zero-sum world, someone else’s benefit has to be my loss, and my evil eye glares with jealousy. It’s not fair, I grumble.

This parable acknowledges our feelings about fairness. God does not discount fairness or undercut justice, and God doesn’t undervalue work — those are all important. But Jesus also teaches us that God is *better than fair*, and invites us to get our flawed vision corrected. When we rigidly equate work with compensation, when we promote fairness at all costs, it can blind us to the immediate needs of all God’s people. The important thing, to God, is that everyone gets fed and that no one gets left out.

So can we watch with kindness and delight as God pours loving sustenance even on folks who join the kingdom’s workforce at the last minute? Can we trust that God’s abundance doesn’t run short, that we don’t need to shoot the evil eye at anyone else’s blessings?

In this story Jesus expands fairness to mean radical equality before God:

God does not will that anyone’s life should be wasted, so God extends the invitation indiscriminately and repeatedly, in order to gather as many as possible into the vineyard.

---

<sup>3</sup> Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. p-. 357-8.

God shows no partiality among persons (Rom. 2:11; Acts 10:34); all are equally deserving — or undeserving — of the opportunity to work, so the reward for all workers is equal as well...enough for one's "daily bread" (Matt. 6:11).<sup>4</sup>

"Are you resentful because I'm generous?" God asks. Or can our envy melt away and be replaced with generosity like God's?

Pat lives in Portland, OR. At certain street corners, she noticed, recent immigrants gather early in the morning. They are willing day laborers waiting for someone to hire them. Sometimes they wait for hours, and some days work never comes.

Pat herself is well past retirement age but she's incapable of putting her feet up if there's someone out there in need. She decided that these guys need to eat something hearty. So on many early mornings she grabs a friend or relative, makes coffee, eggs, pancakes, packs it all in her vehicle they call the Manna Van, and they take breakfast to the laborers. Pat has no restaurant license or food truck permit. Maybe that's her way of being undocumented too. She just knows that with or without employment, with or without citizenship, everybody on those street corners needs their daily bread, and she's able to provide it with love.

That's even better than fair.

In the name of God the vineyard owner,  
Jesus Christ who invites everyone's labor,  
and the Holy Spirit who heals our vision.

---

<sup>4</sup> Blanchard, Kathryn D. "Matthew 20:1-16: Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012. Kindle location 3409.