

Change of Rules

Matthew 20:1-16

At one time in my life I was a union steward. I spent a great deal of my time and energy learning to negotiate for fair wages and benefits for work performed. But I would not dare to believe I could negotiate what this boss provided. When taken literally, this parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard raises the hackles of any business person or union person, whether in the corporate or not-for profit world. This parable is certainly not about a fair wage or just recompense for work done. In fact, it goes against our sensibilities of what is just and fair in our understanding of how the world should operate. Hard-working, "good" people have always asked: what kind of God would offer the same reward to those have earned it and those who have not?

We don't just struggle with this parable; many of us struggle to understand any of the parables of Jesus, because somehow they just do not seem to make sense. Our temptation is to be too literal about who the people in the story are and what they represent. So it is helpful to keep in mind that we understand them in their context and for the lesson intended. Through parables Jesus sought to help his listeners to understand the kingdom by using analogies and symbols they could relate to. "The kingdom is like ..." "The kingdom can be compared to ..." In this parable Jesus is saying in the kingdom of God the opportunity to work in the vineyard is a gift in itself. There is no room for human pride, since one's only choice is either to answer the call to work in God's kingdom, or to stand idle and waste one's life altogether. 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. 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.

Despite earthly appearances of inequality with regard to who has "earned" a greater or lesser reward (Jews/Gentiles, longtime workers/latecomers), this parable makes clear that there is radical equality before God. Reward comes not from each worker's individual merit, not from the quantity or even quality of their labor, but rather from the gracious covenant offered by the one doing the hiring. God promises and delivers but one reward for all—represented by a single denarius (basically enough for one's "daily bread," Matt. 6:11). This story reminds us of the story of the manna in the wilderness (Exod. 16:2-15) when God was creating a new people who would embody an alternative to the ways of Egypt, the ways of domination and submission, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. God gave his people the gift of manna. The manna was nothing fancy or luxurious; it was basic sustenance, "daily bread." With manna, everyone had plenty, but no one had too much. The leaders and the servants received the same amount. The people who worked all day and the people who had little to do received the same amount. The able and the disabled received the same amount: plenty, but not too much—and it was all a gift. **Charles**

Campbell

This parable is not unlike the parable of the Prodigal Son. The elder son in the story was incensed that the younger brother who squandered his inheritance was welcomed home with unabashed lavishness by his father. *It is not fair*. It is not fair that the elder son, who stayed home and did what he was supposed to do, did not get his just reward. No, it is not fair—and that is

exactly what many of us hear when we hear this parable. How unjust of the landowner not to give those who labored all day in the hot sun their just reward. How unfair of the landowner to treat each of the laborers equally, despite the disproportionate hours they worked. How unfair this sounds both to my union and management ears!

How easily we can relate to the grumbling of the laborers who assumed that because they went into the vineyard early in the day, they would be paid more. These same kinds of dangerous assumptions can be in our closest relationships, within our work settings, within our congregations, within our national thinking. There is a saying, "Assumptions are planned resentments." Whenever we assume anything, we set ourselves up for possible disappointment or even worse, as we set the other person, place, or thing up as the object of our disappointment, anger, or resentment.

Even in our family and friend relationships we sometimes struggle with those who assume we know what is going on in their lives and who are hurt and angry when we do not respond as they assume we should. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the only assumptions we made were:

- —God loves me and all of creation deeply and profoundly.
- —I and all others are made in the image of God.
- —God's generosity is beyond our wildest imagination.
- —There is nothing I can do to earn or deserve God's generosity.

How different our lives would be if we lived from those assumptions!

What we learn from this parable is that the landowner began by giving everyone in the story work. Each of the laborers was unemployed and each was given work to do with the promise of pay. They all began in the same situation but easily forget by the end of the day where they started. Their

energy went not to the fact that they had work and been paid but to the inequity they saw. Envy became more important than what they had received. "Are you envious because I am generous?" asked the landowner (v. 15).

Do we find ourselves envious of another's gifts, talents, abilities, possessions, social status, and so forth? How often am I envious of others' good fortune? Envy can cause us to diminish our own gifts and talents and secretly to rob others of theirs. God is the giver of every good gift, whether it is ours or someone else's.

This parable is essentially about the generosity of God. It is not about equity or proper disbursement of wages but about a gracious and undeserved gift. It is not about an economic exchange but, rather, about a bestowing of grace and mercy to all, no matter what time they have put in or how deserving or undeserving we may think them to be. God's generosity often violates our own sense of right and wrong, our sense of how things would be if we ran the world. God's generosity changes the rules. Are we unable to celebrate another's good fortune because we have not celebrated our own? How often am I ungrateful for God's graciousness and mercy? How often do I deny God's love and forgiveness in my own life and in the life of others?

Jesus leaves us with a question: can we learn to see through the eyes of God? Can we accept the changes in the rules? Our ideas of right and wrong, of what is just and unjust, are not necessarily God's ideas—and that is a very good thing. We are reminded by this parable that the tables are turned. When we look for equity, we are surprised to find generosity. This reminds me of my dear cousin William who only accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior when he was 86! William was accepted at the 11th hour when there was only

one hour of sunlight and work left! I thank God for God's generosity and mercy!

You and I are invited and challenged to look at where we see ourselves in Jesus' parable. This parable reminds us that God is a lousy bookkeeper by our standards, and invites us to transform our pride, envy, and hardness into joy by admiring and celebrating God's astounding generosity.

This parable is a reminder that all good things come from God, regardless of humans' ability to earn them (God "sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous," Matt. 5:45). God's standards of justice and value are consistently presented in both the OT and NT as alien to human standards, but God's people are to behave according to these alien standards, these changed rules, neither demanding our rights nor begrudging others' good fortunes. It is clear there is to be radical equality in the church, in which all are equally near to receiving God's gracious reward. **Kathryn D.**

Blanchard

This well-known parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is bracketed by two versions of the Jesus saying "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (19:30; 20:16). **Lewis R. Donelson** The parable calls us to look at ourselves honestly and lovingly, as God looks at us. It invites us to turn from holding grudges because things did not go our way, to let go of the stuff of our lives that keeps us from being joy-filled and grateful people.

One of the sayings we hear these days is "Get over it." There is wisdom in that. Work through things, and then let them go. As long as we hold on to our way of thinking, our union way of thinking, our management way of thinking, we continue to hurt others and ourselves. God forgives us and loves us, and so we must forgive and love ourselves and others. Gratefulness is at the heart of our faith. **Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn**

God's rules are not the world's rules. God has changed the rules. This is indeed good news!

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