

Enough is as Good as a Feast
Luke 18:24-25, Matthew 20:1-16
August 23, 2020
La Verne Church of the Brethren

What do you think of the parable George just read to us? It is commonly called the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Just in case you didn't know, Jesus didn't title his parables. Along the way someone felt like they needed to be titled so we didn't miss the point...the point the one titling it wanted to make sure we got. I'm guessing it became known as the Laborers in the Vineyard because that is the part to which we relate....what we as employees are paid....how we are valued...in comparison to others.

But I wonder if that was the point Jesus was making. He starts out by telling us the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner (not laborers) who went out early in the morning and negotiated with day workers to hire them and offered to pay a fair day's wage. This micro-managing landowner then went out to the marketplace multiple times throughout the day. He didn't send his manager. He went himself and each time hired more day laborers to work in the vineyard. He even hired people to work the last hour of the day.

At the end of the day, when the work day was over, he had them line up...the ones who only worked one hour stood at the front of the line and those who worked all day in the hot sun went to the back of the line. Then the landowner began to pay them for their work. The ones who worked all day watched as the hour workers were paid. He paid them exactly what he had promised to those who worked all day. The ones at the back of the line got excited. "If they are getting a full day's wage for an hour, surely he will pay us 10 times that amount," they surmised with joy. But the landowner paid them all the exact same amount.

I am a child of the Protestant Work Ethic. I was taught that hard work, discipline and frugality lead to worthiness in God's eyes. I knew that if I worked long hours I would get good grades or be rewarded at work. I imagine myself at the back of that line and I would totally angry when I get paid the same amount as the ones who got up late, enjoyed a cup of coffee while reading the LA Times, watched all their soap operas and showed up at 4 p.m. to put in a short hour of work. It isn't that the landowner didn't pay those at the end of the line what he had promised. No. The painful part is that he was generous to those that didn't deserve it.

Every business owner knows you can't operate this way. If reimbursement is not commensurate with hours worked, then how will employees stay motivated? If workers can work one hour and make the same as those who slog away for twelve hours, pretty soon everyone will be punching in at 4 p.m. to work one hour. Jesus' parable undermines both the principles of Capitalism and the principles of the Protestant Work Ethic. Without those two social orders won't society crumble?

Jesus is constantly destroying the ethics that formed my upbringing. Take the parable of the Prodigal Son for example. (Another parable someone decided to name for us.) A father lavishes extravagance on a son that left home, squandered his inheritance and then came sheepishly back with his tail between his legs. The father didn't let the jerk finish apologizing before he threw his arms around him and treated him like a prince...in essence stealing some of his other son's inheritance to welcome back the sinner. If parents everywhere acted like the father in that story it would destroy all sibling connections, right? I think you could actually call that father's behavior enabling.

What about the rich man who comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to have eternal life. "Love God and your neighbor as yourself." "I've got that covered," the rich young man says. Jesus says, "Well then sell everything you own, give the money to the poor and then come and follow me."

The Bible is filled with these scandalous stories. Stories that go against the ideas by which we order our lives — that we get what we deserve...what we work for; that our worth is decided in comparison to others around us; that self-sufficiency is honored; that wealth is the ultimate goal.

Think of the scripture that Matthew read to us today. Jesus said it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle. Oh...Jesus...constantly taking what we value and turning it upside down.

Jesus holds up the vintner who pays everyone the same wage regardless of hours worked. He holds this kind of behavior up as a value we should emulate. The value of rewarding those who don't deserve it. Is this kind of scandalous equality really part of the new reality God is inaugurating in Jesus? It appears so. The parable begins with "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner"...a landowner who gives everyone the same amount of pay regardless of their status, privilege or hours worked...regardless of deservedness.

I think in Jesus' telling of this parable he understood God as the landowner and, if so, what was Jesus saying about God? Well obviously, God doesn't play by our rules. God isn't a Capitalist. God doesn't create categories of winners and losers, deserved and undeserved, haves and have-nots, upper class and lower class. The landowner says to the angry laborers who worked the longest hours, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Jesus lets us know that God isn't fair. God is generous...not with the things we think matter most in our stratified society but with love and grace. If you are generous with love and grace, it impacts everything else....even the economy. This is a shocking truth that could turn the world on its head.

God came into our world as flesh...born into a time when the colonial powers of the Roman Empire oppressed its people. Born into a slave holder society with a culture of nationalism tainted with rampant racism. God was born into the day laborer class in the body and blood of a poor boy named Jesus.

Jesus was a peasant prophet who began a new social movement in which he consistently preached about the economy of God, which he called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. He spoke of the last becoming first; of the meek inheriting the earth; of Mary choosing the better part; of greatness being achieved through servanthood; of humility being exalted; of loving enemies and praying for those who persecute you; of wealth keeping you out of God's economy; of the Samaritan...the other....being the good one. Then he tied our salvation to each other.

This kind of thinking...this kind of Godly movement is dangerous to the powers that be and the Roman Empire decided it had to stop it. What is the best way to do that? Take out its leader. The Empire has the power of death and so they nailed Jesus to a cross — the object of State torture. And what did Jesus do? He embraced it. He never gave up. He never settled for less than the full and expansive call to live in God's economy. He never compromised on the forgiveness of debts; the releasing of the prisoner, the turning of the cheek, the going the extra mile, the feeding of the multitudes.....the demands of an irrational and irresponsibly generous God who isn't fair but is absolutely good....loving us beyond what we deserve.

Jesus takes the object of state torture and turns it into the very emblem of his movement. It becomes the victory logo of the revolution. It becomes the symbol of resurrection and new life. You may try and kill the leader but you can't kill God or God's love or God's call on our lives. The revolution continues. The Economy of God...the Kingdom of God cannot be put to death. The Empire may have the threat of death but the Jesus way has life and resurrection on its side...a movement that uncompromisingly refuses to live in the world's economy...a movement that continues to call us today.

After Jesus's death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the early church...the church of Acts...made up of the people closest to the earthly life of Jesus formed themselves into a commonwealth. This is what it says in Acts 2:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

This isn't a Capitalist or Protestant Work Ethic model. This is revolutionary stuff and it is the way the early church understood who they were to be. And in case you missed it in Act 2 it says it again in Acts 4:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common....there was not a needy person among them....

Then it goes on to tell a story about a couple named Annias and Sapphira who joined the commonwealth and sold their land. But they didn't turn over all the money from the sale. They secretly held back a portion of the money. When they lied about it to the group they fell over dead. The early church was not a proponent of the social order by which we live. They lived in the economy of God...the commonwealth of God.

What makes it a commonwealth is not the worthiness or piety or hard work of the laborers. None of that is ultimately significant. The focus of this parable isn't really the laborers in the vineyard. The vintner...the landowner....is the star....the one who just keeps going back out into the marketplace and calling more people to the realm of equality. The vintner calls to the hardworking early risers and those who sleep in. He invites them to be community to each other...invites them right into the commonwealth of this maddeningly generous God. Friends of the commonwealth of God, we are being invited to ignore the comparisons by which we value and devalue those around us. We are invited to the banquet table for a feast where there is enough for everyone. For as Mary Poppins tells the Banks children, "Enough is as good as a feast." Enough for everyone is the motto of the commonwealth of God. Amen.