

“The New Math of Grace”

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

During my childhood, I spent a lot of time with a group of friends who lived within blocks of each other: Dave and his brother Mark, Wayne, Gary, and me. We all went to the same school; we all attended the same church and Sunday school; and we were all fans of the New York Yankees. We played together after school and on weekends and would be invited to each other’s homes for dinners and sleepovers. We considered each other the best of friends; but if you ever came upon us, you might assume that we were sworn enemies, because we argued and fought all the time. We would argue about all sorts of things: who was the better athlete, who could sing the best, and who got the best grades in school. But our most intense arguments centered on the question of fairness: who was perceived to be cheating, or getting more than they deserved, or seeking an unfair advantage or trying to cut in front of the line. There were many times in which the words “that’s not fair!” would be shouted in our gatherings: for example, if we got a bag of peanuts from the local Planters store, we divided them into five piles so that everyone got the same amount; if one person got one more peanut than the others there was a cry that could be heard across town. When we were getting some Coke to drink, we would line up the glasses and with a ruler make certain that no one got even one more drop than anyone else. When we went to the local Dairy Queen, each person’s cone had to contain the same amount of ice cream, as did every slice of pizza at the pizzeria next door. Being accused of being unfair or cheating was the greatest accusation we could lay against each other.

Our competitiveness and sense of justice continued one autumn when we decided to go into the leaf raking business. We offered our services to our neighbours, who were at first glad to have a group of eager young people take care of their leaves; but soon they would regret their decision, as their yards descended into a battlefield with each of us accusing the other of not doing enough work, while others claimed that they should be paid more because their leaf pile was larger than the others. Looking back, I think some of those homeowners paid us so that we would just go away!

Our contentious group was far more well behaved in Sunday school, mainly because our parents were nearby and would have swiftly reprimanded us. But even their presence did not help when our teacher read to us Jesus’ parable of the Labourers in

the Vineyard, today's Gospel lesson. While Mrs. Rand calmly tried to share with us the message of grace in this parable, all we heard was what was at the heart of most of our arguments; for the rest of the class, our teacher had to deal with each of us arguing "*that's not fair!*"

While I wish that I could go back in time and apologize to Mrs. Rand for our behaviour, there is an aspect of unfairness in this parable that centers on a landowner hiring labourers to work in his vineyard. The parable begins in the familiar world in which day labourers are hired at sunrise and paid at the end of the day, in accordance with Torah regulations and Jewish practice:

- "You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning." – Leviticus 19:13.
- "You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise, they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt." – Deuteronomy 24:14-15.

While it was not unusual for day labourers to be hired for the day's work, especially during the time of a harvest, it is unusual for a landowner rather than his manager to go to the town square to do the hiring; but in this parable, it is "*a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.*" (Matthew 20:1). He agrees with those he hires to pay them "*the usual daily wage*" (20:2); this was a denarius, which was the normal day's pay for labourers hired daily ("*I will pay you a drachma a day as wages, as well as expenses for yourself and my son.*" – Tobit 5:15) but was barely enough to maintain a family at a subsistence level. The parable gradually fades into another dimension from that of the everyday world, as unusual features begin to accumulate for which no answer is given. For some reason, the landowner (again, not the manager) returns continually to the town square to hire additional labourers:

- "When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same." – 20:3-4.

No explanation is given as to why the landowner returns again and again to hire more labourers. Jesus does not explain how he could have miscalculated the enormity of his harvest, or why he suddenly discovers that he needs more labourers.

It appears that “*the landowner’s focus is not on the harvest or the crop or even his own profit; instead, his concern is for the labourers and their need for work.*” (Kimberly Wagner). He even returns one last time at 5:00 pm, one hour before the workday is to end, and asks those still standing in the marketplace “*why are you standing here idle all day?*” (20:6). When they reply, “*because no one has hired us,*” the landowner says to them, “*you also go into the vineyard.*” (20:7). While at the beginning of the day the landowner agreed to pay the “usual daily wage” to that group of labourers, as the day went on, he makes no specific promise of payment, only promising to pay them “*whatever is right*” – thus raising the question about what is “right” (*dikaïos*). In the end, both groups depend on the trustworthiness of the landowner.

When evening comes, the landowner now turns to his manager and instructs him to “*call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.*” (20:8). This closing scene in which payment is made contains the deeply disturbing element that makes the story a parable rather than an illustration of a logical point. It begins when the group who were hired last, who had worked only one hour, come forward for their pay. The expectation of both the workers and the reader is that if those who worked twelve hours were promised “*the usual daily wage*” of one denarius, those who worked less hours would receive proportionately less; but that is not what happens, for “*when those hired around five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.*” (20:9). There must have been a gasp that echoed through the crowd, as each labourer was shocked at the payment that this last group received as they began to do the math in their heads about their coming windfall: if a labourer was paid one denarius for one hour’s work, then three hours would bring a worker three denarii, six hours six denarii, and so forth.

- “If we were to take a photo of this moment, I imagine down at one end of the line, the workers’ faces would be marked by disbelief, gratitude, and even shock as they looked down at what they had just been paid. At the other end, you might catch smirks and side-eyes, faces marked by eager anticipation as it dawns on them that there was probably more coming to them that they had even bargained for first thing in the morning. At this point in the story, both ends of the line view the landowner as wildly generous.” – Wagner.

Those hired first now expect that fairness demands that they will receive more: “*Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more*” (20:10); but to their shock and disbelief, they also receive “*the usual daily wage*” – exactly what they agreed upon at the beginning of the day. Both these workers and readers who assume they are committed to justice – equal pay for equal work – share the consternation

of those who worked all day, enduring the heat and fatigue in the vineyard: “*when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.’*” (20:11-12). Their grumbling even appears to have a supporter in Jesus, who had taught his followers that “*the labourer deserves to be paid*” (Luke 10:7). “*All of a sudden, their view of the landowner changes: no longer is he an odd yet generous character, but instead someone who clearly lacked common sense, business acumen, or any appreciation of what was just.*” (Wagner). We might expect that when the landowner discovers what the manager has done that he would apologize to his workers and make restitution by paying them based on the hours they had toiled in his vineyard; but that is not how the landowner responds to the grumbling of the labourers. Instead, his reply is both curious and incomprehensible to those who are only seeking what is fair:

- “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” – 20:13-16.

The landowner at first asserts that it is his money to do what he wants and that he has paid them fairly, per their agreement. He then asks them a rather strange question: “*Or are you envious because I am generous?*” or literally, “*Is your eye evil because I am good?*” Envy is a sin of being upset at another person’s good fortune. Scripture traces its beginning back to the devil himself: “*... but through the devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.*” (Wisdom of Solomon 2:24). The question is a challenging one; those who worked all day are not mad because the landowner was generous, but because he was not equally generous to everyone. “*Their sense of justice is violated, and the landowner seems to be living in a different world by different rules than the rest of them.*” (Wagner). The different rules by which the landowner functions can be seen in his final words to his disgruntled labourers: “*So the last will be first, and the first will be last*” (20:16).

While Jesus offers no explanation to either his disciples or to those who read this parable as to its meaning, it is clear that this parable is not to be taken as a guideline for labour relations or as an allegory for those who are sent out by our Lord in response to his earlier teaching that “*the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest*” (Matthew 9:37-38).

- “This parable is not a lesson in corporate economics or an example of how employers, even Christian ones, are to treat their employees ... the purpose of this parable is not to provide a practical guide for the management of a vineyard, a factory, or a classroom.” – Thomas Long.

The key to understanding this difficult and disturbing parable lies in the way Jesus introduces the story: “*For the kingdom of heaven is like ...*” (20:1). This parable is not to be understood according to human standards, but according to the standards of God and the Will of God for God’s people. It is an example of the Word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Isaiah when he proclaimed that “*my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (Isaiah 55:8-9). It is another example of the content of Jesus’ teaching from the very beginning of his ministry, when he proclaimed “*repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” (Matthew 4:17). Through his teachings and parables, Jesus teaches his followers about the reign of God that is not based on human standards, norms, or expectations, but on the loving acts of God and God’s Will for all of humanity, the fulfillment of the kingdom for which we pray when we echo the words Jesus taught his followers: “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*”

- “In fact, God’s good and gracious will come about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us ... whenever God breaks and hinders every evil scheme and will – as are present in the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh – that would not allow us to hallow God’s name and would prevent the coming of his kingdom, and instead whenever God strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his word and in faith until the end of our lives. This is God’s gracious and good will.” – *Small Catechism*.

Jesus’ parable, “*while affirming the sovereign grace of God, rejects presuming on grace. Grace that can be calculated and expected is no longer grace.*” (M. Eugene Boring). This parable shines a spotlight on the extravagant generosity of God, which is not something that is deserved or merited. It is simply a gift that the Lord is free to bestow at his good pleasure.

- “No one is so high or can rise so high that they need no longer fear that they may be made the lowest. Again, no one has fallen so low or can fall so low that there is no hope of their becoming the highest, for by this all merit is reduced to nothing and God’s mercy alone is praised, and it is firmly decreed that ‘the last shall be first and the first last.’ In saying, ‘the first shall be last,

‘he takes away all your pride. But in saying, ‘the last shall be first,’ he takes from you all despair.’ – Martin Luther, 1525.

During our years at Stony Brook School (where we argued as much as in our neighbourhood and at church), we were given a few days off so that our teachers could attend seminars on teaching “the new math.” While I honestly cannot remember any of these lessons (since I was never very good at either the old or new math), it may be said that what Jesus is teaching here is the “new math of grace,” which is based not on what we have earned or deserve but strictly on what God wills to shower upon us through God’s gracious love for all people. According to Robert Farrar Capon, *“if the world could have been saved by good bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus.”* It is a “new math” in which God chooses to shower God’s blessings upon us *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”* (*Small Catechism*). It is a “new math” that does not accept even the loss of one sheep but rejoices when all are brought back to the fold. It is a “new math” that does not count our trespasses, debts, or sins against, but liberates us from them not by our own merits but through our baptism into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the “new math” of God’s grace that assures us that *“in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”* (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is the “new math of grace” that is at the heart of the Gospel message, that *“grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less.”* (Philip Yancey).

- “People are prepared for anything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour’s work as for a day’s. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage feast of the lamb.” – Frederick Buechner.

That’s not fair!

As loud and obnoxious as we could be, our group of five highly argumentative young boys were right about Jesus’ parable. What he is presenting us is not fair by any

standard of human interaction or labour practices. Justice calls for equal pay for equal work and equal and fair treatment for all. But Jesus' parable is not a lesson about how labourers are to be paid or how equity is to be practiced; it is a lesson about God's grace, about the coming kingdom of heaven in which God will gather all of God's children, of the love of God that shows blessings upon us strictly because of the wideness of God's mercy and God's love for all of us. Our role in all of this is simple: *"For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."*

Amen.