

Faith Mennonite Church
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Joetta Schlabach

The Landowner and the Vineyard Workers
Matthew 20:1-16

During children's time you each had an opportunity to enter the parable as one of the groups of workers. I'd like to hear some thoughts on the parable based on the various groups. Those of you who went to work first and worked the longest, how did the outcome of the parable feel? Did you identify with the complainers? And those of you invited to work just an hour before quitting time, how did it feel to be paid first and given an equal amount to those who had worked all day?

So what's going on here? One of the more traditional interpretations of this parable is that it is purely spiritual; the landowner is God calling people to salvation/heaven. It doesn't matter when we're called – even if we make a deathbed profession of faith we'll receive our reward. But that doesn't really fit the story, and the stories that immediately precede it, in Matthew 19, are very much about the here and now: Jesus' care for children and his pronouncement that we must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven; and Jesus' direction to the rich young ruler, who was evidently doing an excellent job of following all the commandments, that to "be perfect" he needed to sell his belongings and give them to the poor. There is a physicality to these stories... a concern for how we live in our present, social context. These are stories of *shalom* of well-being in all aspects of one's life—of everyone's life.

To enter the world of this parable and the way Jesus' audience likely heard it, it's helpful to know that many of the people who flocked to hear Jesus were likely day laborers. Many were probably farmers who had worked small parcels of land, which they lost when they became indebted, either due to the heavy Roman tax burden, or as happened in ancient Israel (and today), due to personal or natural catastrophes. We don't know if the principle of Jubilee, as described in Leviticus, whereby land was to get redistributed every 50 years, ever happened in ancient Israel. We can be sure that it didn't happen under Roman occupation.

So we should hear this parable as if we were unemployed and our only hope of employment was going to a public market area where day laborers would gather in hopes that someone would come to hire them for at least some portion of the day.

And on this particular day a landowner with a vineyard needs laborers. He's out looking for laborers first thing in the morning and promises a day's wage. Those first hired must have breathed a sigh of relief: they know they will work all day and will take money home at the end of the day. And if this was harvest time and they were picking grapes, I imagine they also anticipated eating a few along the way!

But the rest of the story gets interesting. Why does the landowner keep coming back to the market? We're there enough workers when he went the first time? It doesn't seem entirely like a worker's market because the final workers tell him that they've been waiting idle and no one has hired them. So this landowner seems to be as interested in the well-being of unemployed workers as he is in his actual labor needs. And this becomes clear at the end of the day when he settles accounts with the workers.

Everyone gets a daily wage, regardless of the hours they worked, because their families all had similar needs. If the land-owner had paid a proportionate wage based on actual hours worked, the latter workers would have only taken home pocket change—and the laborers who worked the full day wouldn't have complained! That's how it works in a capitalist/market economy. But in the economy of the kingdom ensuring that everyone earns enough to feed one's family is the first priority.

Here in Minnesota we have a couple excellent examples of companies who have organized themselves in ways that seem to mirror this parable. Most of us have probably heard the story of how Marvin Windows up in Warroad, responded to the fall of the housing market when the economy crashed in 2008/09, with the subsequent drop in demand for new windows. As the primary employer in that small town, they felt responsible for the well-being of the families of their workers. Rather than lay anyone off,

they simply reduced hours across the board so all would maintain an income, albeit reduced. In several years, when the housing market picked up again and their production surged, they didn't have to re-hire or train new workers; their labor was in place.

Those of you with a longer history in this state than I likely know the Toro story. Ken Melrose was appointed CEO of the Bloomington-based company in 1981, when they were on the verge of bankruptcy. Following is his description of how he proceeded to guide the company:

I felt it was my calling from God to build a culture using the concept of servant leadership. It seemed obvious to me to look at the "rank & file" employees as the real strength of the organization.

We were careful not to let the salary gaps up and down the organization get too large and cause disgruntlement. We were particularly concerned about stock options getting out of hand creating a feeling of "haves and have-nots," paying particular attention to the employees at the lower part of the pay scale. We wanted to engender the idea that we all were one big team and all had a stake in the company's success. To initiate this we gave every employee a share of Toro stock as a symbol, and then built on it by creating a 401k that annually rewarded all employees with stock in the company. While the managers at the top had more stock than those at the bottom, the fact was that we were all "owners." We then designed durable name badges with each employee's name, followed by the word "Owner"!

Moreover, to "put our money where our mouth was," we worked hard to preserve our employee force as well as their compensation when times turned tough. If we had a bad year, it was often because of weather. Reacting to this via layoffs and/or hurtful wage cuts made no sense since weather usually corrects itself within a year. If we did have to cut wages and salaries, we started with the officers, and then the management (e.g., no bonuses first, then salary reductions, and so forth). Our plan was to protect the lower paid employees as long as we could. After two El Niño years without cuts, the employees became believers. This reflected our philosophy that every employee was important, and it was management's responsibility to keep the work forces' compensation intact.¹

Melrose retired and left Toro in 2006 and went on to form a new company, Leading by Serving LLC, whose mission is to advance the principles of servant leadership in business organizations.

In Amy Jill Levine's book *Short Stories by Jesus*, about the parables, she warns that, at their best parables may leave us feeling uneasy. But I think this can be a positive parable for each of us. For any of us who have spent time unemployed, or struggled to make ends meet, it reminds us that God's desire is for full employment, for everyone to be able to earn enough to care for themselves and any dependents. And for any of us with ample resources and business skills, it's an invitation to consider how to use those resources to help shape the structures of work in our society and to practice these kingdom economics.

And the bottom line: God is generous in grace and love toward all regardless of our ability or responsibility. Can we receive and share this generosity without complaining?

What more might any of you wish to say? How has this parable spoken to you today? Have you ever experienced a reversal, an unexpected gift of sustenance?

¹ Theologyofwork.org