

“The Usual Daily Wage” / Matthew 20:1-16 / 21 September 2014

Well, it's not fair. You have to admit it. One band of workers spends the whole day in the field, while another band of workers dawdles in one hour before quitting time, and they all get paid the same? No, it's definitely not fair. You know, it's not so much that we don't want people to have enough. It's just that we want them to earn it.

You know what would make me mad? If I spent my whole life doing the right thing, putting others first, giving away my money, sitting on committees of presbytery, sleeping in the chapel for Family Promise, stifling the angry expletives that come to mind when I stub my toe really hard—doing all these noble things, only to discover that the guy who spent his life at home drinking Yuenglings, playing video games, and yelling at his wife ends up getting a house just as big as mine in heaven. Of course, I'm not sure that there are houses in the afterlife, and the life of faith is not about getting into heaven, but wouldn't that just be a kick in the pants? You know what would make me mad? If the dad who allows his kids to fill their innocent little heads with graphic, violent images, the dad who allows his kids to eat whatever they want, who never helps them with their homework and lets them say words that I cannot here repeat, if that dad ends up sitting beside me on stage when they're giving out the “Father of the Year” awards. That'll make me mad. Of course, I'm being a little dramatic in order to make a point, but let me tell you about something that really does make me mad. I know a preacher who has never written a sermon from scratch. He goes to sermon-sharing websites—if you can believe that such things exist—and he lifts his sermons from other preachers. He plagiarizes the great princes of the pulpit, Marshall, and Buttrick, and Craddock. He finds sermons in books and preaches them as if they were his own. While my whole week is spent wrestling with a biblical text, searching for ways to bring it to life in my particular congregational context, this guy is cutting and pasting the words of Barbara Brown Taylor and Frederick Buechner into his Sunday script. He calls it a day and goes out to play golf. Of course, come Sunday morning, he ends up tripping over someone else's words, reading his manuscript aloud like a book. It used to make my face burn with anger whenever this guy's parishioners would rave about what a great preacher he was. It's not that I begrudge him the admiration of his congregation. It's just that I want him to earn it!

I told you several weeks ago that I have old, old memories of my great-grandmother, a woman in her nineties with a single silver braid wrapped around the crown of her head. She ended up dying of cancer, and I remember all the adults in the family saying, “It's not fair. How come such a kind and loving person would get cancer?” I suppose the reason I remember the conversation, though it took place in 1976, is because small children are always interested in questions of fairness. “It's not fair,” my parents and grandparents bewailed. “That woman wouldn't even eat a cookie without saying grace first. She was a saint. She didn't deserve this.” And I suppose it's true that there's really no fairness when a good person suffers. And yet, I don't suppose that her illness was part of some eternal plan. She might have gotten sick because of all the chemicals and pesticides that were used on her farm, seeping through the soil into her well. She could have gotten sick because of her diet, or genetics, or long term exposure to some carcinogen. I doubt that God looked at her life and said, “Oh, yeah, this one gets cancer.” But she was in her nineties! Was it fair that she got to live so much longer than most people—and surrounded by a family that believed she could turn water into wine...but then be too holy to drink it? The adults just wanted everything to be fair, but maybe fairness isn't what it's about.

What's fair? What's not fair? It's not as if the stakes are very high in Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Nobody's getting rich in this story. All we're talking about here is the regular daily wage, daily bread, just enough money for one more day of life. Some laborers earn it. They spend the whole day working, from six in the morning to six in the evening, while others show up and put in a single hour until quitting time. But they all get paid the same? Now, I'm not sure what vineyard workers have to do. I seem to have the vaguest memory of an old episode of “I Love Lucy” where Lucille Ball ends up working in an Italian vineyard, walking barefoot in a winepress. As I recall, the work didn't look hard; she mostly just got into a grape fight with her coworker. But my guess is

that vineyard work is hard. The workers would be on their feet all day long in the Mediterranean sun, hauling water for the plants, carrying baskets full of grapes, cutting dead growth off the vines. You'd be mad, wouldn't you, if you toiled all day at a job like that, then some latecomers drifted in one hour before the whistle blows, and ended up collecting just as much as you—the usual daily wage? It's not that we don't want others to have enough for the day. It's just that we want them to earn it, like we do.

Scholars are all over the map about the meaning of this parable. Some think it's about covetousness. Some say it's about how the whole Jesus movement would end up catching on more with Gentiles than Jews—thus the latecomers end up scoring big. Still others think it's just a story about human worth, how we're all worthy of daily bread in God's eyes, regardless of our productivity. To me, it's very telling that the all-day workers say, "You have made them equal to us." It's pretty clear, too, that the landowner just wants everyone to have enough, whether they've earned it or not. The generous landowner doesn't seem to care what people deserve. He cares about what they need. What might our world be if you and I were more concerned about people's needs than we are about whether they've earned what they get?

You have to ask yourself, What kind of person ends up standing around in the marketplace all day, waiting to be hired, but constantly getting passed by? They might be ne'er-do-wells, louts, drunkards, and crooks, the kind of people an employer doesn't want to take a chance on. But it seems just as likely to me that they're the unfortunate: they've seen too many winters, or too few. They're the bent and the broken, the maimed and the lame, the simple and the haunted. If a fellow is waiting all day to be hired, and nobody hires him until 5pm, when the landowner is desperate to get the harvest in, then it seems to me that employers took one look at them and said to themselves, "Not that guy. He couldn't possibly have what it takes." In fact, the landowner in the story already passed these same folks over three times before he finally hired them. They're the disadvantaged. Nobody wants to take a chance on these guys. They're just not right. Isn't it interesting how the landowner makes sure the healthy and the strong have just about finished the day's work before he goes out and hires the unhealthy and the weak. You and me, we want people to have enough, but we want them to earn it. It seems to me that the point of Jesus' parable here is that God just wants everyone to have enough, whether they deserve it or not. We don't receive blessings according to our merit, but according to our need.

Let's talk about merit for just a moment. I remember a day on Maui when my wife and I went zip-lining. We dangled on swings, literally a thousand feet over remote mountain gorges, flying at interstate speeds before arriving safe and sound on the other side of rocky chasms. Michelle screamed like a chimpanzee all the way across each rift. We went soaring over pineapples and palms. There were desert bushes and acacias far below, for that was on the rainless side of the island. The opposite end of the same island was lushest rainforest. It was a beautiful place, perhaps the most beautiful I've ever seen. We paid for what we did; we had enough to do that. That was a year ago. Then again this past summer we went to the Outer Banks. And we took my parents on an oceanliner cruise up the east coast of Canada, to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, because we thought it was their fiftieth anniversary. Turns out, it was only their forty-ninth. I work hard! I sit with dying people, and I do funerals. I walk with people through some of life's toughest stuff. I need my vacations, as you surely do. But I know very well that there's a single mother on the North Side of our city who works two dead end jobs, who puts in much longer hours than I do, who makes more sacrifices than I do, who leads a life of love and grace, and she's hoping against all hope that her boss will give her next Sunday off, just so she can take her kids to that park where the homeless people sleep and maybe have a nice picnic, just a day away. Do I deserve more than her? No. It's not *fair*. It's *not* fair. I just wish I could find her. I just wish I could give her a little bit of the freedom and the luxury that is my life. In the greater scheme of things, in the life of the world, there are times when I'm not the guy who worked all day then hobbled home with a sore back and a sunburnt face. Quite often, I'm the guy who worked an hour and made out like a bandit. I receive so much more than I deserve. Don't you? We want people to earn

what they get! There's no earning. There's no deserving. There's only a God in heaven who wants all of us to have enough for today, daily bread, the usual daily wage.

Is it too much to ask that everyone might have enough? What if we worried less about fairness and more about kindness? Are we big enough, are we mature enough, are we loving enough, to work all day but then rejoice that those-who-didn't end up getting enough, too? The only way to be that magnanimous is to realize within ourselves that we have not earned our many blessings, either. It's not about earning. Who in your life has not earned your kindness, your forgiveness, your attention? Don't you know that undeserved kindness is the only thing that finally transforms hearts? It's not fair. It's not. Amen.