

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 20, 2020  
The Rhythms of Labor and Grace  
Matthew 20:1-16

You may have heard this story before, of laborers searching for an honest day's work. They present themselves each morning in a public place, in the hope that a potential employer will select them from the crowd of their peers. We don't know exactly what distinguishes these laborers from one another. But we have our hunches. Perhaps, the landowner has hired some of these men before. If this is true, then he likely has some knowledge of their work ethic and skill level, each of which would provide him with valuable information as he searches for the right crew for the present tasks.

But as we begin to question what's really going on here, it's helpful to remember that this passage says nothing about any previous contacts between these individuals. No one in the text is named; and there is no mention of recommendations from other employers. For these reasons, I have come to believe that the landowner has little to assist in the hiring process aside from first impressions and a few cursory questions. So I imagine him surveying the available talent before inviting the most fit and seemingly healthy individuals to join him, for these are the ones who are most likely to perform well the physically demanding work that lies ahead.

For their part, the laborers appear to be eager. None of them refuses the offer to work, and each agrees to an oral contract for the usual daily wage. As the narrative continues, there is still more work to accomplish so the employer returns to the meeting place at several other times throughout the day. And on each occasion, he selects additional groups of workers to serve as he needs them. Understandably, the agreement is amended. No longer does the employer promise to pay the “usual daily wage,” but rather, “whatever is right,” in an appeal to justice that is culturally constructed.

In the modern world, employers often determine pay scales based upon the industry standard or the going rate for various kinds of labor in a particular market. While the ancient system was less formal, it also had its similarities. And in those days, the usual daily wage for manual laborers hired by the hour was one denarius. Now, if that doesn't sound like much, then you are on the right track because one denarius “was barely enough to maintain a family at the subsistence level.”<sup>1</sup> A day's wages for an hourly laborer, in other words, was barely enough for a family to eke out a modest existence.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 393.

Those hired first, it would seem, are the most fortunate ones. For while each subsequent group of laborers was grateful to have paid work to accomplish as the day wore on, we can only assume that the employer's promise to pay "whatever is right" implied less than one denarius. Less than a family would need to fulfill its most basic needs. And yet, because something is better than nothing, each of the men agreed to lend their services. And each depended upon the trustworthiness of the landowner.

Douglas Hare writes that "from infancy we learn that if we behave well we will be rewarded, if badly, we will be punished. As we mature, it becomes obvious to us that the rule does not always apply. Sometimes our good deeds are either ignored or badly repaid. Often our bad behavior eludes punishment."<sup>2</sup> And here, in our second lesson this day, everything hinges on the subjective promise to pay "whatever is right."

At the end of the workday, the laborers line up expecting to receive their due. The landowner calls to those hired last and presents them with a pleasant surprise. Inexplicably, "whatever is right" turns out to be the usual daily wage, even for those

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 228.

who have only worked for a couple of hours. They have received far more than they expected, and are naturally elated. In turn, the landowner offers the same pay to each group of workers, no matter how long they have labored. And when he pays those who were hired first, they are stunned to receive the same reward as the others. One denarius. Exactly what they had been promised.

Shawnthea Monroe observes that “researchers have long known that human beings are hard-wired to compare themselves to other members of their group or tribe. Noting the success, or failure, of peers is how individuals determine their place in a hierarchy. Such comparisons can give rise to positive feelings of ambition and empathy, or negative feelings like malice and envy.”<sup>3</sup>

“Even primates are sensitive to comparisons or perceived injustice. Psychologist and primatologist Frans de Waal conducted a study with monkeys in which all the monkeys did the same task, but when the rewards were handed out, one group received a better reward for their work. When the monkeys were asked to perform the task again, the group who had received the lesser reward refused to work.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Shawnthea Monroe, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 3*. ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, (2020), 331.

<sup>4</sup> Monroe. Pg. 331.

Our second lesson this day presents what one scholar describes as “the triumph of grace,” juxtaposed alongside “the resentment of grace toward others by those who have worked long and hard themselves.”<sup>5</sup> For those who think of themselves as the first hired, this “parable is upsetting because it functions to challenge and reverse conventional values, including the sense of justice and fairness.”<sup>6</sup> “Those who had worked all day begin not by objecting to the grace others had received, but by expecting that they themselves will receive more. Then, when they receive the just fulfillment of their contract, they object not to what they have in fact received, but that others have been made ‘equal’ to them. They have what they have by justice; others have been made equal by grace. It is the last resentment that they find unbearable.”<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, a CEO named Dan Price decided to make a bold business decision. At his firm, Gravity Payments in Seattle, “Price announced that he was slashing his own million-dollar salary in order to raise the base salary for workers at his company to \$70,000.” Price, who was raised in a practicing Christian home, “determined that \$70,000 was the minimum amount a person needed in order to live in the Seattle

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<sup>5</sup> Boring, 394-395.

<sup>6</sup> Boring, 393

<sup>7</sup> Boring, 394.

area. His business advisors thought he was crazy, but since Price was willing to bear the cost of the increase himself, they let him do it.”<sup>8</sup>

As you might expect, “not everyone was happy about Price’s decision. Gravity Payments lost some clients who feared that their fees would increase in order to pay for this social experiment. Price was accused of driving up wages in the Seattle area, which critics said would lead to unemployment. More importantly, Price lost some talented employees who left because they felt slighted. They grumbled against the CEO, saying it did not seem fair to double the pay of new hires while long-term employees got only a modest raise.”<sup>9</sup>

But, Price stayed the course and, in time, Gravity Payments gained dozens of new clients. “The productivity and morale of its employees has improved remarkably. Wages in the Seattle area have not skyrocketed, though some business owners, inspired by Price’s bold move, have raised entry-level pay. For Dan Price, paying people a fair wage has brought out the best in many workers.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Monroe, 332

<sup>9</sup> Monroe, 332.

<sup>10</sup> Monroe, 333.

Friends, as we consider the rhythms of work and grace, I invite you to consider when you were hired. Because more likely than not, we are the ones who are grumbling, for it is easy to think of ourselves as the ones who were hired first. But, if we are honest with ourselves, someone else likely began the journey of faith before us. Should we each receive the same reward? I wonder.

May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.