

**SLD09.21.08 25<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Get Over Your Bad Self”**

So we're going to be hearing a lot from Jesus in the next few weeks, and here's a heads up - he's not at his cheeriest. That is to say, not all the red letter words he issues these days proclaim good news. Frederick Buechner remarks that often “the gospel is bad news before it's good news.”<sup>1</sup> These days, I'm thinking, maybe more often than not.

Last week, for example - remember Jesus' word about forgiveness? How we ought to offer it to others the way God offers it to us? Generously, compassionately, and *endlessly*? Ugh. A lot of times I don't want to do that. Or *can't* do that, at least without God's help. And apparently I'm not alone.

Remember the story about the generous king and that scumbag of a slave? How the king forgave all the slave's debt even though the slave owed him ten thousand talents, which I told you was worth 15 years of slave labor? Which I thought was pretty impressive by way of generous forgiveness. Well, Anne G. was listening and paying attention (I *like* that in a parishioner), and doing some figuring. And she told me after worship that I had *way* underestimated how many years of slave labor that generous king had forgiven – it wasn't 15 years, it was 150,000 years of slave labor. *That's* the magnitude of forgiveness God give us. *That's* the good news. The bad news, of course, is that most of us have a pretty hard time mirroring God's behavior most of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, [Listening to Your Life](#), HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, p. 281.

Well, the good news this week is again about God's extraordinary generosity, about the abundant returns offered anyone who works even just a minute for the Kingdom. The bad news is how annoying God's generosity can feel in a world in which we expect to earn what we have, and get what we pay for. We're none of us big fans of unfair.

Today's story is a confusing tale about laborers in the vineyard all coming to work at different times of the day but getting the same pay. In fact, even the ones who show up just an hour before closing time get paid for the whole durn day! Not only does that not seem fair, it doesn't even makes sense!

Needless to say, the other workers grumble – who wouldn't? I mean, like Tom Keys says in Jordan's *Cotton Patch Gospel*, "When you're talking money, *that's* not funny!" How were the ones who'd been slaving since dawn *supposed* to understand the latecomers getting the same paycheck. It just wasn't right.

But to their complaints, the owner replies, "look, didn't you agree up front to the usual daily wage? Well, you got it, didn't you? Take what belongs to you and get outta here."

Pretty cold comfort, huh.

But, of course, the landowner in this parable is the Kingdom of God, and who gets to argue with the Kingdom?

"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?"

And doesn't God get to do what God pleases with what belongs to God?

And what doesn't belong to God?

Still, this is not sounding like good news.

I'm pretty much siding with the early risers, myself, aren't you? But it sounds to me like God is pretty much telling them to get over their bad selves, that God gets to be God whether or not they understand, agree with or condone God's behavior.

Okay, I guess that sounds like what we otherwise call the "sovereignty of God," but we count on God to *choose* to be a little more pleasant, and fair, with all that power.

In this scenario, though, God's sovereignty is coming across distinctly *unpleasant*, and not a little random, which makes me nervous. And those who had been working hard from dawn to dusk, well, it just makes them mad.

So what are we supposed to take away from this tale? That God is not a capitalist, doesn't operate on the free market principles we hold so dear? That getting what you earn and reaping what you sow isn't always God's m.o? For a lot of us in the Western world – well, all over the globe now - that is seriously bad news. I mean, look how uncomfortable we all are at the current crisis of stability in financial markets – what if God were randomly throwing out all these decades of careful, savvy, intentional investment (which God may, in fact, be doing) and announced, "Sorry. Thanks for playing, but the winner is...this homeless guy who hasn't worked a day in his life."

'Course, today's tale doesn't present God as a socialist, either, tending to the underdog, making sure everybody gets what they need, no more, no less. After all, those workers weren't asked how much they *needed* for their labor, just if they were willing to take the going rate. The guy who worked all day to support a family of fifteen didn't get any more than the single playboy who happened by during the last hour.

Nor does God appear in this story to be a communist, to where we all work together to get what *everybody* needs. Nobody's working together in this story. The workers' take-home pay doesn't appear to depend on cooperation any more than on the time clock. It's hard, really, to decide *what's* behind God's m.o. in this story.

Although, notice that the only unusual thing is that the laborers who don't work much still get a full day's pay. The only odd thing is that God is more *generous* than anyone expects. Than anyone thinks is reasonable. Or fair. If that guy only worked an hour and got a full day's pay, why, I should get 8 times that for working 8 hours, right? At least in *our* economy, that's the way it generally works. But *God's* economy doesn't seem to operate by the same rules (except possibly to mothers and lovers and best friends.) *God's* economy seems to operate by its *own* rules, regardless how the rest of us feel about it. Even if we don't like how unfairly generous God can be.

When you think about it, it's kind of a funny thing to get exercised about, isn't it? God being too generous? But remember the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son? Or remember when your mom gave something to your sister that she didn't give to you? What is it about us that makes us hardly be able to stand that? Maybe zero sum economics is just hardwired into our DNA. But obviously, it's not hardwired into God's being.

The bad news in this story may be that everybody gets whatever God feels like giving us – fairness, faithfulness and market forces be damned. The good news, though, is that God is always generous.

And I'm talking that's really good news, too! Because guess which workers we are? The ones who slave all day and into the night for the church and God's kingdom

(on the odd occasion when those two intersect)? Or the ones who show up when we feel like it, when it fits in our schedule and doesn't interfere with all the other equally important demands on our lives (like our families and our work and our personal sanity?)

Of course we're the latter! Of course we're the ones going about the *real* business of our lives who, once in a while, usually at the last minute, glance up and feel a sudden tug to go do something godly (or churchly – which we all know is not necessarily the same thing but we try).

Well, guess what! God dishes out the same generous plateful of the Kingdom pie to you and me as the canonized saints get! And that's good news!

Not only that, but God doesn't even wait for us to show up to work. In Jesus' story, the Kingdom goes *out*...goes out *looking*...goes out looking for whoever wants to pitch in. In Jesus' tale, God goes out looking for whoever wants to join in God's Kingdom work, for however long – all day, a half-day, a couple hours, even just a few minutes – and whoa, the paycheck is still solid.

So what's the bottom line from this story?

That God is sovereign? Okay. We reformed Christians at least SAY that's what we believe.

That God doesn't operate on our terms. Who would argue with that?

That none of us, first or last, earns what God give us? I'd say so.

That sometimes we resent what other people get, or have? It's been known to happen.

So stop keeping score? There's a punch of that in there, don't you think?

Be grateful for what you have? Always a good idea.

And, generally speaking, that the transaction between God and humanity is not all about us. Not what we want, not what we need, and certainly not what we expect, so we need to get over our bad selves when we either don't get what we want, or don't want the other guy to get what he got.

For some of us, the bad news is that we may not feel we're getting what we deserve. But for most of us, not getting what we deserve is unequivocal *good news*, and thank you, sweet Jesus, that such is the Kingdom of God, or, to be quite frank, not too many of us would feature in it. What we know about God is that God does as God pleases with what belongs to God. But we also know through Christ Jesus that the Maker of the Universe tends to be what you'd call "generous to a fault."

We may not understand God's scheme, or always agree with it, or even think it's particularly fair – like Ann Morris's recent death, that makes some of us mad, a lot of us sad, and most of us sort of confused by its suddenness (though, quite frankly, Ann's death would feel premature no matter *when* it happened.) But, like it or not, God is God and we are not. And is God not allowed to do what God chooses with what belongs to God? And what does not belong to God?

Younger than many of us, Ann didn't end up laboring in God's vineyard as long as a lot of us have, or will. But God gave her the whole of God's Kingdom anyway, for her wholeness, for her pleasure, for her peace.

And that's not working for us? We don't like God's payment plan? It doesn't feel fair or right or just? Well, I can tell you it's not working for me. At least not around Ann's death.

But what I hear Jesus telling me in this passage is to get over my bad self. God is God and I am not. That, and something else. I also hear God's promise, God's kind, loving, generous promise, that I, you, we, won't any of us, get what we deserve. And for most of us, that's really good news.

To the glory of God. Amen.