

Nobelton/Schomberg United, September 24, 2017

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Matthew 20:1-16

The story of the landowner, the laborers and the vineyard is a parable...a type of story Jesus told to teach others. These stories included examples of life that the hearer would have understood in his or her context. The stories have a message about the kingdom of God, which needs to be interpreted to create meaning. This particular story is not the easiest to understand but perhaps that is what makes it so engaging. It is a story that brings up ideas about justice, fairness, power, jealousy, generosity and I'm sure many other things.

Traditionally when read this passage includes the 16th verse that says "So the last will be first, and the first will be last. Something that many have interpreted to mean that the parable is a statement about the gift of eternal life that will be granted to "all of the laborers in the vineyard," all of God's people. There is nothing wrong with this interpretation, but upon reflection this story could mean other things.

The landowner, the one who holds the power, is in effect God and the laborers are the people...but what if the story is about the generosity of God, a generosity that may not always seem fair on the surface. What if this story is about justice and how we can live out lives of justice, by modelling the landowner in our own lives? This is one of the wonderful things about Bible stories. Bible stories can often have multiple meanings. We don't have to interpret them the way tradition has taught, we can look at them...reflect on them and see how they bring meaning into our own lives. Jesus used stories that would resonate with the

people. It would have been common for men to stand in the marketplace daily just hoping to find some paid work...they would have understood that not every landowner would have paid the same for the same amount of work...there were no unions or workplace laws. No, the power would have been in the hands in the owners and there was little the laborers could do but accept the pay that was offered them. Perhaps this is a story that teaches us how to live out God's generosity. Stories have the ability to help us understand God and our lives...

It was 9:15, and the waiting room was full...this morning when she got there, there were probably about 40 people...some young, some old, men and women, different nationalities. She held tightly to the folder that held her resume. This was a callback from an interview she'd had last week. It was an entry level job, but it would get her foot in the door. Judith had emigrated from Nigeria 4 years ago. There was a time when she had managed an accounting firm back there, but much of her education did not transfer to Canada. She had managed to go to a community college at night school while she worked full-time in a local coffee shop. The money she made there was barely enough to scrape by. If it wasn't for the food bank and the community centre's help there wouldn't be enough money to buy food at the end of the month for her 2 children. She had a one bedroom apartment. She shared the bedroom with her 6 year old daughter and her 10 year old son slept on a pull out couch in the living room. Things were better in Canada, at least her children were safe, had a school to go to and free health care...but it wasn't easy.

It was now 3p.m. Some people had been called in...others had gotten up and left because they had waited so long. A woman she thought to be a

receptionist came out and looked at her and the man across from her ...and said I'm sorry...we're done with the interviews for today...you'll have to come back tomorrow. The man stood up angrily and Said...you've got to be kidding me...I've been here since 11:30 and you tell me now...forget it I don't want your stupid job. Judith stood up, smiled. She shook the woman's hand and said. "Thank you for the opportunity...I will be back in the morning."

This is not the end of the story, but I want you to notice something. In this story we are getting to know Judith as a person...we have a little background on her life and struggles. We get a sense that Judith is a woman who is willing to work and is in need...this is different than the parable of the Laborers. All we are told is that they were in the marketplace, some all day because no-one would hire them. But for some reason the landowner chose to hire these people and pay them the same wage...why would he do this?...it seems unfair to pay one person the same amount for working 12 hours as another is paid for working only 2...but was this really unfair? What was the story behind the landowners action?

Judith, started to turn around to walk out the door when she heard..."Wait, don't go...come with me." She walked into an office where 2 people were sitting behind a table a tall woman in a grey suit walked in behind her sat down and said. "Judith, my name is Carmen Stone...I'm the owner of this company and I'd like to offer you a job. We were very impressed with your resume...but what we really wanted to know about you is how you would react when faced with change and disappointed. We think you handled it very well. We also recognize that it takes a lot of patience to wait to be interviewed for a job for such a long time. We've been watching you today, and you have shown and incredible amount of patience. Now

I'm sorry to tell you that the job you applied for has already been filled, however...we have another position which is a management position. We think with your experience, upgraded education and the qualities you have demonstrated today that you would do very well. It pays \$15, 000 a year more than the job you had applied for. Do you think you'd be interested?"

It may have seemed unfair that Judith had so much experience and education in Nigeria, but it didn't translate into Canadian standards. It may have seemed unfair to make someone wait all day in a waiting room for an interview, only to be turned away, only to be brought back in...but in the end the owner...the person with the power...did what was right. She offered a fair wage to someone who was a victim of circumstance...who was patient and willing to do what she had to, to find work to support her family...in the end Judith was given a fair chance and a just opportunity.

So why would the landowner in our story offer jobs to people who had been standing around all day? Perhaps the landowner had compassion for those who had been standing in the Marketplace all day and couldn't get work...sometimes the last to be picked for work were those that had a disability or were older. The ones who had worked all day were likely younger and more fit...perhaps this is why they were picked and why they could work all day. Maybe the landowner recognized the determination and patience it took to remain all day, just hoping to find some work to support a family at home. Maybe the landowner had compassion and wanted fair treatment, justice for the latecomers for a reason. What might look unfair on the surface may in fact be an example of justice that we don't quite understand.

So what was Jesus trying to teach in the parable of the landowner and laborers? Maybe he was trying to say that sometimes we may not always understand why God's justice sometimes doesn't seem fair but there is more to it that we may never understand. Maybe Jesus was trying to show that we must use our power for the greater good...even when others don't quite understand what you are doing. Maybe Jesus was saying "God will use what has always belonged to the Creator for the good of all even if humans fail to view the world through God's eyes." ¹

Jesus had a story to tell...Judith had a story...we all have stories. The stories of Jesus have been passed down to us for our use...to help us to better understand God and how we should live. You might hear a different message from this passage and that's okay...the Bible, like God is full of mystery. But for today...go... knowing we have a God that is generous, just and fair. Know that you were made in the image of God and as such too can live out lives of generosity, justice and fairness, and that the Spirit can guide you on this path.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ Emmerson Powery, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2157