***FAIR WAGES***

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September 24, 2023

Texts: Matthew 20:1-16 and Jonah 3:10-4:11

Last week the United Auto Workers went on strike over wages and other benefits in negotiation with the big three auto companies here in the U.S. The issues include hourly wages, discrepancies in wage scales for workers doing the same work, concessions granted by the union at the time of the pandemic which have not been restored, and the 20 billion dollars in profits the automakers have made so far this year. They are not alone. Teachers argue that they have been paid less than fair wages for the work demanded of them. Nurses and med techs have seen their wages rise significantly in the pandemic. Hourly workers have seen wages rise as labor shortages have employers looking for workers, though many of them still make less than a living wage. Meanwhile small businesses struggle to pay workers without pricing themselves out of the market. And many of you keep an eye on the stock market with share prices key to the health of your IRA or 401K plan. Economics are entwined in our lives and life together as individuals and as a society.

It might be tempting then to look at the parable we just heard to see if it offers any guidance in establishing a fair wage today. Good luck, for the parable is not really about a religious dimension to economics – Jesus will address that issue in other places. This parable is about the Kingdom of God, and Jesus draws on familiar economic figures in the vineyard owner and laborers to tell us something about it. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like this,” says Jesus. He says that a lot in the gospels, trying to help disciples understand what is beyond their understanding. The kingdom to which he refers is not a place. It is a way of living under the reign of God – not just in the future, but now. It is that way we aspire to live into as Jesus’ disciples, a kingdom that is like this parable of the vineyard workers.

A vineyard owner went out early in the morning to hire workers to pick his grapes. He went out before the heat of the day set in, for there were a lot of grapes to be picked. On a tour of a vineyard in France I learned that the sugar content of grapes is tested each day as harvest approaches, and when the sugar content is just right the grapes must be picked immediately. There is a narrow window – perhaps only hours or a day – in which to get all the grapes picked before the sugar content changes. So, the vineyard owner needed a crew to work hard and fast to bring in the grapes while they were at their peak. He went out early to get the best available workers from the local labor pool in the town marketplace; there he found a crew ready and willing to work in exchange for the usual wage – one denarius for one day’s work, a day’s work for a day’s pay. Off to the vineyard went the workers, contracts and coffee in hand, to harvest the grapes of the landowner.

Some of you remember the walk to that vineyard at daybreak. You remember because you have never labored for any other landowner except the Lord. You heard Bible stories in the cradle and grew up in the church. You have eaten at 312 potluck dinners, survived 2,563 sermons, sat through 1,425 Sunday School classes and taught another 78, and sang “Jesus Loves Me” more times than you can count. All the days of your life you have shrugged off tempting diversions to offer your hands in faithful service to God for the work in this vineyard. This morning you come to continue your work in this corner of the Lord’s vineyard. But that is not the end of the parable.

The morning chill was long gone and the sun was shining brightly on the backs of the vineyard workers at nine o’clock when the landowner realized he needed more workers and added another crew to help harvest the grapes. At noon and at three o’clock two more crews took their places in the landowner’s vineyard. Each agreed to come and work for the landowner with his promise that they would be paid “whatever is right.” No contract, simply a promise and a handshake. Those crews were welcomed into the fields by the early morning workers for the sun was hot, the fields dusty, and the grapes abundant. Fresh arms, legs, and backs were a welcome addition for the day’s work; together they picked and hauled the clusters of grapes that hung from the landowner’s vines.

Some of you found your way into this corner of the Lord’s vineyard with those workers long after daybreak. Perhaps it was a youth program in which the Lord caught your attention. Or perhaps you wandered away from the church in college years and found your way back when children arrived. Or perhaps you ran far away and then found something missing in your life, and God has now filled that void with new meaning. At all ages and stages of life, the Lord finds workers for his vineyard who have not yet accepted the invitation to come and follow him. Perhaps it is such an invitation that you have accepted in the midpoint of life’s day that brings you here this morning to work side by side with those who have been here from the beginning, to work in this corner of the vineyard that belongs not to us, but to the Lord. But that is not the end of the parable either.

At five o’clock, as the heat of the sun was subsiding and the shadows lengthening, the landowner returned to the marketplace and found more workers standing idle. It was near the end of the day and no one had hired them. Perhaps they were not as strong as the others, perhaps they had arrived late or had simply been overlooked as afternoon rolled into evening, for they were still there in the marketplace, still available, still willing to work if someone could use them. The landowner needed them, and so they too were sent to the vineyard to work with the others who had gone before them.

Some of you may be five o’clock workers. The Lord’s work seemed far less important through life than your work or your golf or your family. There was so little time and so much to do that you simply were unavailable to work for the Lord until now. Was it a heart attack or cancer that suddenly helped you to hear the Lord’s call? Was it the death of a loved one that made your own mortality a sudden reality? Was it the sudden realization that as the shadows grew longer in your life your need for God grew stronger? Is that what brought you here at a late hour, willing to do what you could with the time left in the day? “It is five o’clock and no one has found me worth hiring;” say the workers. “Come and work in my vineyard until the sun sets,” says the vineyard owner.

Side by side the laborers worked in the vineyard – early risers and late arrivals alike – plucking the grapes under the setting sun. As darkness crept over the land, the workers gathered to receive their pay, and at the direction of the landowner, those who arrived last were paid first. They had arrived at 5:00, yet each received a denarius – a day’s wage for less than a day’s work. The 3:00 crew, the 12:00 crew, the 9:00 crew, each received a like wage for their work. They were paid “whatever is right” according to the promise of the landowner, and the landowner determined that what was right for their part-time work was a full day’s wage. The landowner was unnecessarily generous, and the workers were necessarily grateful, or rather, some were grateful.

The last to be paid were those who had been first into the vineyard. They approached with great expectation, for if the other workers who had put in less time were paid a denarius, surely they would receive more. Surely they would be rewarded for their hard work under a scorching sun from sunrise to sunset! They had bargained for a day’s pay for a day’s work, but given the generosity of the landowner, surely they would receive something more. Eagerly they reached out their hands and received – the same denarius as the other workers, the same pay for which they had negotiated at sunrise. They received what they had bargained for, but they were angry and grumbled, for the landowner had not been as generous with them as he had been with those who came after them.

Was it fair? When I asked this question in the Bible study on Monday morning most said, “No.” Those who worked all day should have been paid more than those who worked a shorter time. But the answer changed with the recasting of the question. Was it fair to pay those who worked all day exactly what they had bargained for at daybreak? Yes, that was fair. That is what they had agreed to. But was it fair to pay those who worked all day the same denarius as those who worked only a few hours? Should not harder work have earned a greater reward? The all-day workers were not angry because the landowner had cheated them; they were upset because he had chosen to be more generous with those who came later. He had paid them all the same.

In their response are echoes of Jonah’s response when God decided not to destroy the repentant Ninevites. Rather than rejoice that the people had repented and been saved, Jonah sulked. It made him look bad to have decreed the people’s destruction and then have God spare them. They had been awful people; even their repentance was unworthy of God’s gracious change of mind. Jonah resented the grace shown to them, just as the all-day workers resented the grace shown by the vineyard owner to those laborers who arrived later.

If places in the kingdom of heaven were awarded on merit then the parable would have found those all-day workers exalted, with every right to grumble and complain. But the kingdom of heaven is not a meritocracy; it is a kingdom of grace. This parable is not about economic wage scales or fair business practices, for the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who chooses to be generous and give the same reward to all, a landowner who rewards all workers equally regardless of the amount of work they do as long as they come to work before sundown – like the Ninevites repenting before their destruction. The parable is not about working one’s way into the kingdom; it is about grace freely given. Do you really want to sit with Jonah and the all-day workers, self-righteously judging the generous grace extended to others? Or are you thankful that the grace has been extended to you?

The kingdom of heaven is not a reward for faithful service; it is not earned regardless of the quantity or quality of our service. Whether we have been Christian from the cradle or converted on death’s bed, we do not earn our way into the kingdom of heaven. God offers us that glorious gift solely because God is merciful and loving and wants us to accept the invitation to come and work in the divine vineyard today. Our response is to work faithfully at whatever hour of the day we arrive and to welcome those who come to join us, working side by side, hand in hand, to serve the divine landowner who invites us to come and work in this vineyard. We do not labor here in order to earn a reward, but with gratitude for the Lord who invites us to come and work. It is not very satisfying for those who begrudge God’s generosity to those who come later; but perhaps you have arrived later than you think! For the good news of the Gospel for us and for all people is this: in the Kingdom of Heaven, grace abounds! Grace always abounds! Amen