

## Matthew 20: 1-16 Generous or Unfair?

This parable speaks to me about two different issues on my initial reading for this morning's message. The traditional view of this parable is that Jesus' story is an allegory or metaphor—a story where the characters portrayed represents a truth about God and the nature of God's realm. This way of looking at the parable contains both issues which occurred to me. Both of these aspects are part of the overall and familiar message we have in Scripture. Yet we are also told another fundamental truth about the stories of Jesus: that is that there was always something within them that was radically different from what those listening to him would have expected. They contain an element which illustrates how different the kingdom of heaven is from our experience. So there may be a non-traditional view which we need to hear in this story as well. But first let's begin with the familiar interpretation. After all, Jesus begins with; "for the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner...But doesn't that seem somewhat out of focus? We visualize the kingdom of heaven as a place, as heaven; while we view the landowner as a person...or perhaps a person representing God. So in this metaphor is the landowner meant to be God? Or is the landowner meant to be an example of how things work in the kingdom of heaven? But if we leave that puzzle aside for the moment—we have a story which we are very familiar with—and a scenario which resonates with our view of how things should go: a parable that doesn't seem to offer a challenge to us, but a comfort. A summation of the story Jesus tells is that a landowner needs laborers for his vineyard. At least that is what we surmise when early in the morning he goes to the market and hires those who are there seeking work—we might view them as day laborers. We are told he reaches an agreement with them for the usual daily wage. They leave and go to work. We are not told why in this story but later, about 9 o'clock he returns to the marketplace, seeing more laborers standing there idle. They are seeking work and he also hires them, saying he will pay them what is right. This happens two more times on this same day. So at the end of the day he has laborers who have been hired at four different times and thus have worked different amounts of time in his vineyard. We are not given any information about why the landowner keeps returning to the market place and hiring those he finds idly standing there. There is no statement about the need for more workers to accomplish the work in his vineyard, but he continues to hire and send laborers there. We are not told why there are workers there at the later times, although he does ask the very last group, "Why are you standing idle all day?" They reply, "Because no one has hired us." It seems lack of opportunity not unwillingness to work was the cause. We don't know where these groups hired later were in the early morning hours when the landowner first seeks laborers. We aren't given any reason that they haven't found work. Since they go to work when he hires them, it seems that they indeed wanted to work. The fact that none of these details are given in the parable itself has not prevented interpreters from drawing some conclusions about the different groups of laborers. Many of those who have interpreted this parable in the past have made assumptions about who these workers represent, but the parable itself contains no information about them other than the time of day that they are hired and the landowner sends them all to his vineyard promising the first ones a daily wage and the rest a fair day's pay. This hiring is the first phase of the parable. Since Jesus introduces

it as telling us something about what the kingdom of heaven is like, and the vineyard was often associated with Israel by the prophets, much of the traditional later interpretations have considered the landowner to be God; the vineyard where the laborers went was God's kingdom and the laborers were various groups brought into covenant relationship with God—beginning with the Jews and later including others—even Gentiles. As I mentioned earlier this view of the parable is one which we as Christians find comforting. To many it seems an inclusion of all within the promises of God. The second part of the parable concerns the events at the end of the day—when the work is completed and the laborers come to the manager of the vineyard to receive their pay. The landowner tells the manager to pay the laborers beginning with those who were the last to come to work for him, then to pay those who were hired first thing in the morning. We all know what happens. Those who only worked a brief amount of the day got the same daily wage that was agreed upon with those who were hired first thing that morning. It seems that the landowner decides that the daily wage is the pay that is “right.” And the results are just what you would expect. When those who had worked the longest saw that those who had only worked a short time received the wage that they were expecting, their expectations rose for what they would receive. When it came their turn to be paid and they received only what they had been promised, they were not happy. We understand their unhappiness—and often join with their conclusion that what they received in comparison was not fair. After all they had worked longer, endured the heat of the day, had done more for the landowner than those who had come so late...that they received the same for all this additional time and effort...it just wasn't right. The landowner responds to the complaint by saying, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.” Because of this statement the emphasis is on the generosity of the landowner and interpreters point to the generosity of God in granting all eternal life. In this view the parable is a statement about the gift of eternal life as the ultimate equalizer that will be granted to all “laborers in the vineyard.” But would these view of the parable meant these things to those to whom Jesus was telling the story? I am sure that they would have recognized the two views of the landowner—unfair or generous. But doubt that they would have reached any conclusions about Gentiles being included into those of the covenant. This manner of payment for labor would have been a radical and unexpected ending to the story, but what would they have seen as the message? Often when trying to look at more than the surface level of one of Jesus' parables we look to see how it compares among the gospel accounts of the same event or story. That doesn't work here as this parable is unique to Matthew. Another way that we use to help our understanding is to look at the context or placement of the parable in the larger narrative. This parable states in two places that the last will be first and the first will be last. The first occurrence is when the manager is given instruction about how the laborers are to be paid; the second is the last statement made by the landowner. In chapter 19, just before this parable we have several stories which are informative. There is the story of the rich young man who want to “earn eternal life by a good work” but when told he must give away his riches and leave behind everything to follow Jesus, instead goes away sad. Peter then points out that he and the other disciples have actually left everything behind to follow Jesus. Jesus tells them they will be rewarded, but then we have almost that same statement which ends our parable: “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Special privileges are downplayed; although

there are rewards, they aren't earned. In the same vein, after this parable, Jesus predicts his coming passion for the third time which prompts the mother of James and John to ask for special treatment for her sons. This again elicits a response from Jesus which indicates a reversal of the way to be first, she and the disciples are told you must actually become a servant in order to be great. James and John have also been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry, but they are not to receive special privileges because of this. All of these surrounding passages seem to lend weight to the understanding that what is promised is the gift of God. It is not earned, but comes from God's generosity. These are all very valid and true conclusions which can be drawn, but are they the only ones there? In fact, are they the ones which Jesus wanted to convey to his listeners? I just recently have begun reading a book by Amy Jill Levine called "Short stories by Jesus." She is a New Testament and Jewish studies professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She is also Jewish and looks at Jesus through eyes which recognize that fundamental fact that Jesus was a Jew in ways that we who have been brought up with little or no exposure to Jewish thought without the filter of Christian doctrine cannot do. The introduction to her book is titled, "How we domesticate Jesus' provocative stories." After thinking about that introduction and studying this parable, I have come to the conclusion that by sticking to the traditional interpretations we may indeed have made this story comfortable for ourselves. If we go back to the opening line, the one where Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is like and examine it closely we find other possibilities. First of all, the word translated as kingdom could just as easily be read as realm. Second, the use of heaven throughout Matthew reflects the Jewish aversion to using God's name. Thinking of it in this manner, the opening line could just as easily read, the realm of God is like... The realm of God—the place where God rules is like...When read that way, Jesus is no longer talking about a distant place and a future reward...Instead Jesus is talking about here and now...in our lives what it is or should be like when God rules. The example of the landowner then becomes a model for how we treat others—not by what they have earned or deserve according to our own standards, but what is the way that they should be treated according to God's command that we love, that we serve, that we place ourselves and our self interest last. Because of who we are living in this broken world that is no longer such a comfortable story. It calls us to move beyond the attitudes like those of the first day laborers to actions based on generosity and love. Although it was not a verse in our reading for today, Matthew 19:26 gives us the way that we can move toward living out this call. "Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." So we have a resource which strengthens us to live as we are called to live. Thanks be to God.

