



God's Unfair Economy?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, September 21, 2008*

Matthew 20:1–16:

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘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. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

As is often the case, the same news can sound either bad or good—depending on your perspective. To the laborer in the vineyard who began work at the crack of dawn, “it’s not fair!” leaps quickly to the lips. For the latecomer given a full day’s wage for little more than an hour’s effort, the response is more likely, “thank you, thank you!”

I have heard these very responses given when reading this parable with others. An older, well-educated, white woman, the heir of a considerable sum of money, was really outraged at God’s apparently random generosity. Whereas the men I knew in the homeless shelter—who often waited each day at an appointed curbside in hopes that one of the local “landscapers” would need extra labor for the day—heard in these words a promise of mercy and hope.

Most people I know are conscientious and hard-working; “it’s not fair!” is the reply I hear. I confess it to be my first response. So this is a hard parable. It’s hard because Jesus is presenting an image of an economy which is so dramatically different from the one in which we live and move and have our being that it is almost impossible for us to picture it. By our reckoning it is absurd. We work hard. We have been taught to expect—and thus we seek—to be rewarded for our efforts. It is our way: rugged individualists at heart, everyone.

Yet here Jesus offers *equal* pay for *unequal* labor. Say the first, scandalized, workers: ‘we’ve borne the burden of the day, these last only one hour, and you have made them equal to us.’ Equal pay for unequal labor: God’s economy. Jesus’ parable makes us aware—uncomfortably aware—that the economy we have bought into is not the only and—as we see all too well in these days—is seriously flawed.

As we seek the Kingdom of God, we may be reassured by holding in our mind’s eye a picture of a different economy. Remember Isaiah’s words: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord”? And the prophet’s question: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat!” (*Isaiah 55*) But that’s a different economy, isn’t it? The promise of fulfillment and abundance. We’re not there.

Picture the laborers: it is easy to see them in the course of a day or the course of a lifetime. First out are the conscientious and hard-working, ready to seize the day. Then those who overslept, those who just arrived—recent immigrants. Later come the men and women who had crises to tend to at home, a sick child, an invalid parent. The shysters and the just plain lazy eventually make an appearance.

To each of these, in their time, the vineyard owner says come. He offers a job, a place, an opportunity for the day, a chance to earn their keep; a chance to be valued and found worthy. Even those whom the world would shun. The owner pays them all—not according to their labor, but according to their need. Not because the laborer deserves it, but because the Lord is generous.

What do the first ones say? “That’s not fair!” Righteous indignation! Nothing like it to get the blood boiling! “Those cheapskates got in on the tail end of my work; who do they think they are?!” Because, you know, we so prefer to earn our wages and be proud, than to receive freely and be grateful. “Hey! I went to school; I’ve been trained; I worked hard to get where I am. That must count for something.” It does. But it does not earn me God’s grace. Asks the vineyard owner, “Are you envious because I am generous?” “Darn right!”

The surprising thing is that “fair”—by which we mean—if we’re honest—playing by the rules of a competitive economy—is not, in fact, all that fair. Whatever we do, for God’s sake, let’s not ask for fair.

In the long run, if the U.S. market somehow manages to hold steady going forward, who is going to be hurt by the current crisis? It is becoming clear that all of us will be hurt. Certainly, the employees of Lehman Brothers will be. (Maddeningly, while many of those high up the ladder may lose, many at the top will still walk away with millions). Lehman goes under with \$680 billion in outstanding debt, so those who anticipated collecting some of that money lose. What about the proposed \$700 billion that the federal government is going to use to buy up the bad mortgages and stem the run on the market? By most accounts, that’s a good and necessary measure under the circumstances.

But every dollar spent on this is a dollar not available for something else—such as social security for the elderly, health care for the needy, infrastructure for schools. Sure, some high-rollers are going to lose big, and some white-collar workers are suddenly without a job, without security, and slim prospects of being hired anytime soon. But as always, it is the poor and the frail who will be hit hardest. On Friday, *The Inquirer* reported that “the financial crisis is spread across neighborhoods all over Philadelphia, where foreclosure filings rose last year to more than 6,000, up 18 percent from the previous year, . . . [but] that residents of minority neighborhoods are three times more likely to receive sub-prime mortgages, . . . and, worse, that 40 percent of predatory loans go to senior citizens.” This morning we read not surprisingly that many of Mayor Nutter’s initiatives are in jeopardy; this is a scary time.

The problem with defending the system we’ve got, is that the system isn’t fair. I think we have a moral obligation to try to fix what we’ve got. But I don’t see a human economy that is truly fair. Fairness as we know it is a provisional standard of conduct, a set of rules, a way of maintaining social order based on a vision of human beings as competitive and implicitly hostile to one another. Don’t ask for fair; ask for mercy; ask for justice.

Picture two different economies.

One looks like a track event, a running race. “On your mark, get set, go!” Run for the gold as hard as you can; keep your eyes on the prize. Know where the competition is; who’s ahead and who’s close behind. Never mind that some started with most of the laps already done, that some are fit while others are missing limbs. Never mind that for some the track is well-lit and well-paved, while for others there are treacherous holes, pitfalls, leering monsters.

When time is called the victors sip cool drinks in the press box, swaggering about, boasting of their triumphs, while the playing field is littered with stragglers licking their wounds and with carcasses, crumpled, forgotten. *If* we started in the same place *with* the same strengths, and with an identical playing field, *maybe* we could talk about fair. But I doubt it.

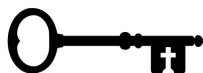
The race I speak of has already begun. We are running the best we know how. So I hope you’re feeling fine and got a good position on the starting line.

I don’t know of a way to stop the race, although we may try to effect the outcome. . . . By convincing the umpire that those poor stragglers need a boost, or by pausing at a difficult hurdle and instead of running ahead, helping the ones behind to make it over too. Trying to effect the outcome: that’s what social service agencies provide, what affirmative action strives for, what most parish outreach ministries seek, what public education attempts to offer. These efforts, good and worthy efforts sometimes, see the race for what it is and try to effect the outcome.

The driving premise of this economy is that resources are limited, so you best get what you can. Because the winners have *so much more* than the losers, and the playing field *never* has been even, no one is quite sure if there would be enough to go around—even if it were distributed evenly. So we all grab and hang on to what we can: our bit of money, influence, prestige, security, advantage. Hang on, and go baby go!

The other economy is driven by a different premise: that all the players are to be given an equal shot, that from God’s perspective we all look like gifted, lost children, so in this economy there is an abundance—for everyone.

Again I picture a field on a sunny day. Instead of a track, however, there is a huge, striped, brightly colored tent. It's a party, a big party. The air is filled with the sound of laughter and music, with the smell of fresh flowers and delicious food, tingling your senses. Children dart and run, playing games, frolicking in the grass. As you approach the tent, people part, creating a path to let you through. A place is already prepared for you, and you take your spot among people you know and don't know; among people who love you. You have brought a gift—which is offered to all, received by all. Looking about, you can see that everyone who arrives finds a place, just for them, and a warm rich feeling runs right through you—a feeling of love, gratitude, belonging, of being home at last. Where the last shall be first—and you are among them.



Open hearts. Open minds.