

Sermon: God's calling to us as his workers

Many scholars consider the parable of the workers in the vineyard to be one of the most difficult parables to interpret. Like any parable, it's hard to know what's supposed to be symbolic, and what the symbols mean.

Jesus loved to use everyday life as the basis for his stories, but there are several things in this parable that just don't add up, and theologians have been arguing over these details since at least the third century.

For example, it doesn't add up that the owner of the vineyard would be hiring his own workers, if he has a manager. That's something the manager would do. And it doesn't add up that the owner keeps coming back to the marketplace to hire more workers throughout the day. Any self-respecting vineyard owner would know how many workers he needed, and would hire them all at once first thing in the morning. And the most obvious thing that doesn't add up is the way the workers get paid at the end of the day.

But Jesus is a master storyteller. He knows the way to set up the scene to grab his disciples' attention. He knows how to build the suspense, and introduce the conflict that creates a good story. And he knows how to resolve that conflict so that his listeners never forget the moral of the story.

And that 'moral of the story' is not what anyone expects it to be.

For this lesson to make sense, we need to know a little background. In last week's story of the unforgiving servant, we learned that a denarius was considered a usual day's wage in the first century. But it wasn't a huge sum. It was barely enough to get by. That's why the Torah insisted that laborers be paid at the end of each day they worked, because those who lived on a denarius a day struggled just above the poverty line. Some employers took advantage of day laborers, paying them as little as possible for extremely difficult and dangerous work. But this was not always the case.

The first century historian Josephus tells us that, following the completion of the Temple, 18,000 workers were unemployed. To meet their needs, and to make sure the Temple treasury was never so full of money that it would draw the attention of the Romans, it became customary for the Temple to "hire" workers to do minimal labor, while receiving a full day's pay.

So, when Jesus sets up the conditions for his story, the number of laborers, and even the flat rate that was paid to all of them, are within the realm of possibility. We have a gracious landowner, who reminds us of a gracious God.

Then we get to the conflict of the parable. It just doesn't make sense that the landowner who hired the workers would tell his manager to pay them in reverse order. There would have been no complaints from the first workers hired if they'd just taken their money and left, before the later workers received their pay. They would never have known how much the other workers got paid, and they wouldn't have cared. They got what was promised to them, and that would have been good enough.

So, imagine their pleasant surprise when they see workers, who had barely been in the vineyard long enough to break a sweat, getting a full day's pay. Imagine their delight as they realize this landowner has a generous spirit. They feel good about the work they've done, and they trust the landowner to be as generous with them as he has been with the latecomers to the vineyard. As they step up to the pay table, they are smiling and expectant, ready to say thanks for the landowner's generosity, certainly ready to come back tomorrow for another day of labor! As they reach out to take what is rightfully theirs, they are already thinking of the food it will buy for their children, of the debts they can begin to pay off with what is left over.

And then the manager drops into their waiting hand ... one denarius. A usual day's pay. The same pay those who only worked one hour got. It isn't fair. It isn't right. But they know the manager isn't to blame – he's just doing his job. They turn immediately to the landowner himself and demand to know what's going on here!

"It's my money and I'll do what I want to with it" isn't a very satisfying response. They were hoping for, "Oh, my mistake, of course you should be paid more." Instead, they hear, "isn't this the amount we agreed on this morning? Can't I choose what to do with my own money?"

And then the real stinger: "Are you jealous because I was generous with others?"

Some scholars think this parable is about salvation history, and the tension that existed between Jews and Gentiles in the early church.

“Shouldn’t the Gentiles have to follow the Law, just as we have all these centuries, in order to be counted as children of God?” the Jewish Christians argued. “Why should they get the same reward as those of us who have lived under the Law since birth?”

Some scholars think it’s about salvation, teaching us that there is no difference, in the eyes of God, between faithful Christians who have lived a holy life since childhood and those who make a deathbed confession of faith.

Other scholars have assigned different meanings to different elements of the story, and some arguments are convincing while others are not. Some have concentrated on the phrase that acts as a pair of bookends around this story: The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. They see this proverb as an explanation of the parable.

But what if it’s the other way around? What if the parable is just an example of the proverb, this saying that Jesus liked to repeat over and over again? What if this story describes exactly how the Kingdom of God is not what we expect, how God takes our human understanding of the way things work, and stands it on its head?

What if the moral of the story isn’t so much, “God is just and generous and can do whatever he wants,” but instead is a lesson in humility for the disciples of Jesus, who had a tendency to think more highly of themselves just because they got to hang out with the Son of God all the time?

What if the point is that God uses a different pay scale than the one we would use if we were in charge? God’s pay scale isn’t based on our merit, but God’s great love for us. God’s pay scale gives us our daily bread, so that we will depend completely on him.

“Are you jealous because I was generous with these other workers?” the landowner asks. Jesus has taught us how to get along with each other, and now he is teaching us how to get along with ourselves when we begin to think we deserve more than we’re getting, when we start comparing ourselves to others, and when we wonder why they get all the blessings while we do all the work.

Envy is a particularly deadly sin. Even if it is never expressed, it eats away at us from the inside. It prevents us from noticing the many ways God blesses us, because we are always comparing our blessings to someone else's, and that comparison creates resentment and anger inside us.

Envy prevents us from living the abundant life Christ promises to us. And if we aren't living an abundant life, we can't possibly invite others to share in it. Instead of directing our full attention on God and his goodness, we become self-centered, bitter, and at odds with God's intent for us.

Last week, Jesus told us to stop counting how many times we must forgive someone else. This week, he teaches us to stop counting someone else's blessings, so that we can start living into our own blessings. God's grace isn't something you can earn or something you deserve because you've been working in the vineyard since the sun came up. God's grace is freely given to all who believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who died to save us from our sins and rose so that we might have eternal life. Accepting this grace leaves no room for envy.

But envy is not limited to individuals. Whole churches have suffered from comparing their ministries to some other church that has more members, a bigger budget, a nicer building, better music, and a more dynamic preacher. Instead of concentrating on making disciples, congregations stuck in envy spend all their energy and resources trying to measure up to some other church's standard of fruitfulness. They wonder why God hasn't blessed their church the way God has blessed that other church.

Sometimes, it isn't another church, but "the way things used to be" that makes them jealous. They look at the denarius in their hand, and wonder why they didn't get a bigger paycheck for all the work they did in the past. They become bitter, and they shake their heads as the church sinks further into decline.

But Christ calls us to make disciples, not comparisons. Instead of whining about what used to be or what some other church has, Christ calls us to work in his vineyard, for the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few.

Instead of comparing ourselves to others, God calls us to put down the measuring stick altogether, and do what we are gifted and called to do as workers in God's kingdom.

So let's roll up our sleeves and head into the vineyard. We have been called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Let's get to work. Amen