

## Equal Pay?

Some years ago when I was at Christ Church in Burlington I had a confirmation class of several teenage girls. Their grandparents were faithful members but their parents rarely showed up in church. Because they loved their grandparents they chose to go through the confirmation process, but they were also thoroughly steeped in cultural values rather than Christian ones.

I didn't fully appreciate that until our confirmation study guide included the parable you just heard. Each of the teenagers took great exception to the actions of the landowner. They said that it just wasn't fair that those who worked all day got paid the same as those who worked one hour. They completely agreed with those who grumbled. I have to admit, I was a bit flummoxed. As one who had grown up in church and heard the parable many times, I had a different sense of it. And I saw very quickly that my explanations were not very satisfying to them. They had never considered that God might not be fair by human standards. If that was what Christian faith was all about, they'd rather stick with American culture, thank you very much.

One reason this parable is problematic is that in a capitalist society we are very focused on relative income. "Equal pay for equal work" is a good rallying cry when it means eliminating discrimination in pay between groups. For instance, men and women should be paid equally for the same work. But in this parable all of the workers are presumably male and all at the same socioeconomic level. This is not discrimination based on physical characteristics; they just happened to be hired at different times.

The closer one looks at the story, the more it appears to be about the opportunity to work rather than income. Only the first hired are given a wage. The master goes back to the marketplace not because there's too much to do, but rather to see if anyone else needs work. Every time he goes, he finds more unemployed men. At the end he pays each a denarius, the standard wage for a day's work. That's another clue. It looks like the master wants to be sure that everyone can feed his family that day, no matter how much or how little he worked.

This parable is not so much about the right way to run an economy as about the nature of God. God wants to be sure that everyone can feed their family. That's consistent with the strong emphasis on caring for widows and orphans and welcoming strangers throughout the Bible. It's also consistent with what we have heard the last two weeks about God's amazing generosity and willingness to forgive.

God does all of this in spite of our complaining. That's not the same as protesting to God about injustice. That's very biblical; just look at the psalms. But the laborers in the vineyard were whining more than protesting. That, too, is common in the Bible. This morning we heard the Israelites in the desert whining about their situation.

Somehow they had forgotten how hard their lives were as slaves in Egypt. All they could remember was the food, the meat and the bread, not the bowls of tears. So they whined to Moses and Aaron. God responded by providing meat and bread in the desert, quails and manna. We're told that it was a test to see whether they would follow God's instructions or not. They didn't, of course; they stuffed themselves but still found reason to keep complaining. Even Moses wanted to give up on them!

Whining humans are abundant in one of my favorite books, *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis. It's an imaginative day trip from Hell to Heaven. The title is a pointed reversal of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Lewis describes several encounters between bright spirits in Heaven and shadowy visitors from Hell. In each case the shadows struggle to let go of something they have put in place of God – distorted love, cynicism, pleasure, insistence on rights, intellectual freedom. (By the way, the insistence on intellectual freedom comes from the shadow of a bishop who denied the Resurrection. Lewis could write biting satire.) In this book God offers each person one last chance to choose love and light rather than death and darkness. God does not give up on people, long after any human would. That's because God has way more grace than we might consider fair.

I think that's what bothered those teenage girls so much. Their concept of God was too small and narrow. It was limited not only by their experience but especially by their captivity to our culture. Eventually Bishop Scarfe confirmed them, but since then I've lost touch. I do hope some of the class stuck. I hope they know that in spite of human failures, God's love and grace are always available. Maybe you'd be one of those grumbling laborers, too. When I'm honest, I know I'd be one. Then I remember that they all still got paid enough anyway. Thanks be to God for that!

[Pentecost 16: Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20: 1-16.]