



SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

Matthew 20: 1-16

For 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 a denarius for the day, 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 a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 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 a denarius?' ¹⁴ 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."

Grace and peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being

In today's world, it seems we're always looking to see how to get ours at any expense. Everything is a competition. Everything comes with comparison. What others have, becomes the benchmark for what I need as a symbol of our achievement and success.

In the academic world, you're not educated unless you have a degree. In the blue-collar world, you're considered unskilled if you do not have licenses. Even love is not acknowledged unless it's been recognized by a court.

We throw the words law and order around like they are only to punish the bad guys when constitutionally speaking, they were put in place for the welfare of society.

Unfortunately, we elect rule makers according to their biased ideological views concerning fairness. It's just the democratic way. We want those who align with our individual values of fairness.

I don't recall ever getting a question on a political survey asking me my opinion about the effect of a proposition on my neighbor. The question is typically related to my own emotional concerns for my own individual welfare.

I can't help but think about my own distorted view of fairness. I know this will sound petty, but It's like the need to be first is hiding in a part of my brain that is only stimulated when someone takes cuts in front of me.

It's rush-hour and there is construction ahead, causing two lanes to become one. Soon there will only be one lane as we all slowly merge into the left lane. But the right lane won't completely close for another quarter of a mile. This leaves half of the right lane and the shoulder vacant and me vulnerable to cuts. Now I'm in a fix. I know some car behind me will go right and travel all the way to the very front, then turn their blinker on to edge their way in. They will plead to the cars in front to let them in as if they did not know what orange cones and a flashing light meant.

If I take my place in the left lane will people be just as thoughtful as I am being and get behind me? Or would it make the world a better place if I take up two lanes, blocking those behind me from passing? Everyone ahead would be very pleased with my act of justice. Yes, that would be the way to make it fair for everyone. But, to be honest, it wasn't about fairness, it was about that place in line I had become entitled to.

How can I possibly read these passages about the day laborers without sympathizing with those who started their work at sunrise? It's only natural for them to be angry. But maybe that's the point of the parable. To show us God's way is unnatural to our world.

For me, learning what is fair began at an even younger age.

For example, there were no water bottles in classrooms back in the day. There were a few strategically placed water fountains outside. When you were thirsty or had to go to the bathroom you had to raise your hand in class and get permission to leave the room. Water going in and out of us was highly controlled by the teacher.

There were no individual water bottles at our desk. The closest thing we had was a thermos in our Flintstones lunchbox, which could only be opened at noon. I'll remind you, we lived in Phoenix, Arizona where paramedics are on call for any sign of dehydration.

At recess, everyone either ran to the field or to a water fountain. If we chose the field first, it meant we would sprint to the water fountain at the end of recess, crashing into the person in front of the line. Anxiety was high and “don’t push” was a mantra.

We all knew the eleventh commandment, “thou shalt not take cuts.” If someone were to take cuts, it would be called out by the person behind.

Thinking back, I remember how upset I was when someone would take cuts in front of me. It didn’t matter if they got in the front of the line or directly in front of me, by God the commandment was violated!

Either myself or someone else behind me, would gently point out that it’s not nice to take cuts by shoving them and shrieking “Don’t take cuts, get in the back!” If someone said, “he’s my friend” then we’d shrug and allow it. It was the first indication that knowing someone can trump everything.

It never bothered me when somebody took cuts behind me because it wasn’t really about fairness for me. It was about me being first.

It still goes on today. At the grocery store, at the ball game, at the airport, anywhere the desire to be first matters and winning or losing are the stakes.

In our society, there is an attempt to legislate everything to ensure the adult water fountains of life are not disturbed.

No wonder this parable about God’s economy is so difficult to accept.

What if the stakes were higher. Like those of Jesus’ time.

People waiting all day for a job to receive one denarii. Just the right minimum to buy food for the day. It was a hand-to-mouth survival. Displaced people who had lost their ancestral land due to Roman Palestinian takeovers. Inability to pay exorbitant taxes. Day laborers and immigrants who were considered the “expendable class.” Jesus and his family were one of these families. Jesus never had a “place to lay his head.”

The dangers of entitlement were poisoning the soul.

I see something very unlike me in the Parable of Jesus. A different economy, a different understanding of fairness. It’s hard to grasp but this subversive gift to the laborers in this parable is being offered to us by God. In God’s economy his fairness is about the

people and their needs. The widowed, the fatherless, the motherless, the displaced, the oppressed, the hungry, the naked and those made invisible.

For us, God bypasses hierarchy, entitlement, legalistic laws, borders and our Darwinian survival system to provide us with radical mercy, radical grace, intrinsic worth and dignity. Once we are awakened as a recipient of this spectacular “unfair” gift, we become the vehicles of God’s liberating and subversive message to the world. Maybe I need to be still and think about this next time I’m waiting in line or sitting in construction.

Amen