



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 20A, SEPTEMBER 20, 2020
EXODUS 16:2-15; PSALM 105: 1-6, 37-45; MATTHEW 20:1-16

RETHINKING OUR ECONOMIC CALCULUS

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."*]

Kathy and I had been dating for a few months in high school when I invited her to have dinner with my family of six. I recall the scene going something like this: pizza delivery was the fare, and when the box was opened and placed on the table, everyone swooped in and grabbed a couple of pieces and began eating. Kathy looked at the empty box and her empty

plate, then whispered to me, what just happened?!

My family was like that. Competition at every turn, and not in a good way. We argued over who got the best seat in the living room to watch television, who used the bathroom first each morning and for how long, who got to

drive the car we shared as teenagers, who had to do more chores, and so on.

The cry went up almost every day from someone who felt they were being cheated out of their birthright by another sibling, “That’s not fair!” An appeal would be made to a parent as arbiter in the dispute, but usually the dispassionate reply went something like, “Yeah, life’s not fair... Y’all work it out.”

I can look back and cringe at the thought of it all now. Everything in our lives was evaluated on the premise that there would not be enough to go around, so you’d better get yours when you could.

I can see now how I lived in that stifled air of scarcity, where if someone else got all they wanted or needed, I would not, or vice versa.

So when Jesus tells this parable of the landowner and the laborers, I hear the echo of our childhood mantra, “That’s not fair.” The injustice of it all! Why should someone who worked just one hour get the same wage I received for working the whole day? That’s not fair, even though I was fully compensated for the work I did.

Not fair perhaps in the ways of the world, but the parable redirects with its unsettling testimonial that God’s grace is imminently

abundant, and the kingdom calculation is not dependent on a variable of scarcity. Instead, the calculus integral to God’s grace approaches infinity—that is, a wideness in God’s mercy that we cannot begin to fathom, but into which we are invited to step, and let the buoyant grace of God pour into our lives here and now.

But there is another layer of reality this parable invites us to consider. One that informs an urgent consideration for us in this moment. That’s how parables work—they are, literally, “cast alongside life” to lend wisdom in a given moment.

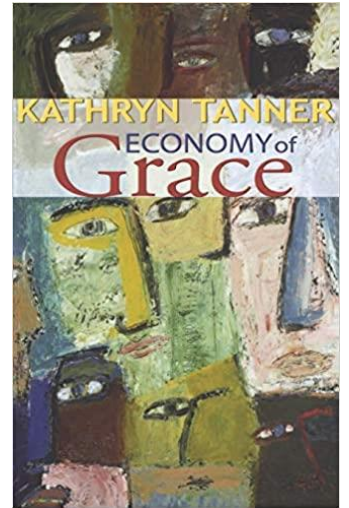
This parable speaks repeatedly of the “usual daily wage.” This was one denarius, the minimum wage established by the Roman Empire for a day of labor. It was the bare minimum for survival, and it was roughly sufficient to provide one meal for the worker and their family. Without it, they would likely go hungry.

So a day laborer stood in the street, hoping a landowner would tag them to work, simply so they could eat. It was a marginal existence, just one rung up from slavery, and often just one stroke of bad luck to slip back into slavery. All of it was of a cloth in the fabric of the imperial economy. And it was rife with abuse.

Jesus was offering a radically different vision in this parable cast alongside the imperial economy of his day. Picture day laborers along the entry drive to Home Depot, desperately trying to make eye contact with a landowner in hopes of a few bucks with which to feed their family. Two are given a nod to hop in a truck; the others are left behind. And all of it with a stifled air of deprave judgment cast in their direction, the assumption that because of their birth country, or their skin color, or their education level, they are somehow unworthy of a more respectful and replete existence that might allow them to cast their eyes beyond the urgency of scoring their next meal.

And then Jesus comes along and casts a vision for a new world order, grounded in profligate generosity. The metaphors are abundantly rich—the vineyard’s ripened grapes, a harvest of plentiful redemption where the man keeps returning to the marketplace to gather more laborers—more in the morning, more at noon, more late in the day. It’s scandalous in its seemingly random ways, presumably until the marketplace was cleared out—a universal invitation to participate in the abundant and merciful work. Remember the parable begins: *the kingdom of heaven is like....this...this...*

About fifteen years ago Yale Divinity School professor Kathryn Tanner wrote a book entitled “Economy of Grace.” I’ve referenced it multiple times because I find her thesis so timely and



apt. She casts a vision of God’s kingdom alongside the imperial economy grounded in competition. At the core is a reframing of the notion of economy, which is derived from the Greek *oikumene*, or household. *Oikos* is the root for many words inviting us into work of the kingdom here and now—words like ecosystem, economy, ecology.

The household is understood as the scope of reference for all that live together, where all embrace a prevailing commitment to the common good, where trust and mutuality are manifest virtues, where all in the household are afforded space for leisure and creative outlets. A subsistence wage for some is simply not sufficient in this economy of grace. The alternative vision is further accentuated by universal inclusion, where relationships need not be competitive, because the pervading gift is one of belovedness—a gift with no conditions placed upon it.

And Jesus is asking us to consider: who is in your household? And how would an economy of grace inform the life of that household?

Whatever your politics may be, it seems to me that we could at least agree that Ruth Bader Ginsburg fiercely sought to enlarge the concept of household throughout her distinguished career. And as our nation's political leaders now battle about how best to replace her, I suspect we will all have opinions about what that process should look like. We can level our charges at the other and expend our energy on accusations of "that's not fair," but I doubt any minds will be changed if our discourse remains at that level. I'm just saying this parable should give us pause...and we should consider who all is in our household...Which begs the question: the one with whom you disagree is in your household, too, right?

So what are we to do?

We opened our service this morning with the Collect of the Day, in which we cast our prayer: "Grant us, God, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly..." This is not a prayer that orients from the present moment to a future time "after this life." When Jesus says "the kingdom of heaven is like..." he is casting a vision alongside our lives, here and now, inviting us to consider a household of grace in which we might meet the eyes of the other and share the gift of belovedness offered freely to all.

What does that look like in your life?

What would it look like in our nation?

Reference

Tanner, Kathryn. *Economy of Grace*. Augsburg Press. 2005.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL