ECONOMY OF GRACE

[Jesus said] "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 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."

Matthew 20: 1-16

It just doesn't seem right, does it?

If you were keeping count, doing the math, here is what you probably came up with. There are five groups of workers who clock in at the vineyard. At the end of the day, the group that came first, the ones who started work at around six in the morning—they have been working for about twelve hours. (You have to understand that this is before unions or labor laws.) The next group that was hired put in about 9 hours, and the next six, and so on. The last group of workers, the ones who have spent most of the day just killing time in the town square drinking coffee, playing cribbage, and waiting for someone to hire them—they ended up working only one hour, towards the end of the day when it wasn't so hot.

Then when it comes time to dole out the wages, the owner has the foreman pay out in reverse order. The late comers who worked only one hour got one denarius, the "usual daily wage," the same wage that those who came at six in the morning agreed to. Now, you can imagine that everyone else in line is doing the math, and the ones who got there early are thinking that this vineyard owner is quite generous, paying a denarius for only one hour of work. If he pays by the hour, as it appears, by their reckoning they are due to receive twelve denarii.

That only seems fair. That seems to be the right thing to do, doesn't it?

But that's not what happens.

Everyone gets the same wage. The ones who slaved away for twelve hours in the heat of the day got the same "usual daily wage," one denarius, that the late comers who worked six, three, or even one hour. And even though we know that that is what they agreed to at the beginning of the day, it just doesn't seem right, does it? The early birds who complain have a legitimate beef. We are offended by this story, and we should be. In fact, if you don't find this story offensive, you probably won't get the point of it.

This is not a simple fable. It doesn't end with a neat moral, like Aesop's fable about the ant and the grasshopper. Instead, the story sets us up; it plays on our expectations, in order to knock those expectations for a loop. For most of the story we see the world through the lens of the marketplace. The story is built on the language of the labor market and wages, negotiation and keeping accounts. That's a world that we are all familiar with. We all keep accounts. As Anna McArthur points out, "Our society is one of earners. We keep up with our hours worked, our tasks accomplished, our money invested. We spend a lot of time earning. We earn money, vacation time, grades, respect, even frequent flyer miles. Our culture is obsessed with what we think we deserve."

And, of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with that approach. We should be concerned about issues like wage inequality by race and gender.

But what happens at the end of the story is that, once again, Jesus shifts our frame of reference. In the end, the point of the story is not about the fairness and justice of the marketplace, it's not really about wages, it is instead about an economy of grace. It is about a recklessly generous owner who disregards conventional notions of keeping accounts, and hires everybody in sight. Again, the story does not have a neat and pithy moral at the end; rather it jolts our world view and offers us an alternative vision, a vision of a God who works outside the boundaries of transactional economies, outside the boundaries of what we might consider fair and just, outside the boundaries of balanced equations.

I remember, nearly 50 years ago, my first experience with High School algebra, and my struggle to make sense of these strings of numbers and letters and odd symbols. But despite my ineptitude at it, I have always appreciated the way that even the most complex problems could eventually be reduced to a balanced equation, where the value of the left side always equaled and balanced the value of the right side. No loss of values, no numbers left over. Math and physics suggest that the world we live in is an essentially ordered and balanced system, an affirmation that has appealed to humans from the beginning of time and continues with us today. There is a certain comfort in knowing that no matter where you go in the world, 2 plus 2 equals 4. Always has and always will.

There is something in us that has an affinity for that sense of balance and equity. Perhaps that is why the symbol of justice most often seen in our civic iconography is the balance scale.

But what Jesus is suggesting in this story is a radical ethic. It is not a retreat from justice. This story is not about a capricious God who chooses to reward laziness and penalize hard work. Rather, Jesus calls for us to stop defining our relationships solely in terms of balancing out gains and losses—our relationship with God as well as our relationship with our fellow human travelers. It calls us to recognize that divine grace does not work according to our zero-sum merit system, but rather by God's extravagant generosity. And we can never earn or merit enough to balance *that* scale. The story is less about rewards than about grace, and invites us into ways of living that reflect God's generosity.

There is a movie called "Babette's Feast." It begins with two elderly sisters in a sleepy, coastal village in Denmark in the 1870s, who agree to take in a refugee from Paris who finds herself on the wrong side of a political revolution. Babette works for them for 14 years, preparing their simple meals of bread and dried cod. One day Babette is surprised by the news that an old lottery ticket she has held on to has paid off an enormous sum. With her windfall fortune, the sisters assume that she will leave them and return to her life in Paris. But instead, she asks if she can prepare a real French dinner for the sisters and several of their friends. To the surprise of everyone invited, Babette spends her entire fortune and prepares an elaborate, extravagant feast. As it turns out, in her previous life, Babette was a famous chef at one of the most exclusive restaurants in Paris. Both the monetary cost of that feast plus the effort that Babette expends preparing it go far beyond what she has received from the two sisters.

But there is more to this story than just an extravagant repayment of a debt of gratitude. The people of this village have grown quite cantankerous and harbor old grievances and betrayals. They are reluctant to sit with each other around the table, they are suspicious of this foreigner and her exotic foods, and they are wary of any kind of indulgence in luxury—it just doesn't fit into their harsh, judgmental theology, where there are clear lines between what is right and wrong, what is just and unjust. People get what they deserve, whether it is reward or punishment.

But as they overcome their Scandinavian reticence and their hesitations and gradually enter into the generosity of this meal, as they sit around this table of abundant grace, strange things begin to happen. Old animosities begin to fade, old scores are erased, and gradually reconciliation begins to take place. In their mutual experience of an extravagant grace, they are themselves transformed by it so that they too are enabled to be extravagant and generous and forgiving.

In the economy of God's grace, our worth and the worth of those around us is not a matter of merit; it cannot be measured out in wages. It is instead a matter of invitation to the rich feast of grace and generosity. And that invitation is not based upon who shows up first or how long we have been here; it is not based on who is morally upright, who has the truth, who deserves to be here. Because, really, in the end, we are all late comers, we are all eleventh-hour workers who are getting more than what is fair and right, more than what we deserve.

The story of the vineyard owner offers us an alternative view to our current climate of seeing everything through the lens of winners and losers, deserving and undeserving, a view which too easily flows into seeing everyone in terms of allies and enemies. It nudges us off that narrow track and into a wider lane where we are less concerned about getting what we think we deserve, and more aware of the value of all those in our vineyard. A value that is not calculated in terms of earned merit or correct political thinking, but a value that we share with everyone born, the simple but profound value of being a child of God.

The point of this story is not how much or how little the workers get paid; it's not about the fairness or unfairness of the wages. It is, rather, all about the generosity of a gracious and persistent owner, who won't be happy until everyone in the marketplace has a place in the vineyard.

May it be so.

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