

“GOTCHA!”
Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 20:1-16
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My daughter Sarah made her first foray into the subtleties of humor when she was five years old and came home from kindergarten with the following question: “Where does the king keep his armies?” Who knows the answer? “The king keeps his armies in his sleeves.” I’d never heard the joke before; it made me laugh. For months thereafter, at random times, Sarah would interject into the conversation, “Where does the King keep his armies?” including one fairly tense family moment. I don’t even remember what the issue was any more, but the grown-ups were ranged against the children, pushed and weary, and ready to lay down the law, and into the fraught silence, Sarah offered hopefully, “Where does the King keep his armies?” And all the other three of us as one, smiled and gave the correct answer. Situation diffused. It’s now the stuff of family lore, our family joke, trotted out in times happy or anxious, and it always still makes me smile.

That’s how a good joke or a good story works. No matter how many times you hear it, you still respond. Jesus was a master of dispensing both stories and one-line sayings that have not only been provocative through the ages; they also still elicit a response every time we hear them. Even though we know the punch line. Even though we’ve heard the story or saying discussed a dozen or more times. It’s still got that zing at the end, the “Gotcha!” that makes us argue with ourselves about it over and over again. There’s the parable of the prodigal son, for example. Or Jesus’ statement that it’s easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get to heaven. But I would argue that of all Jesus’ teaching that does not rest easy with us, today’s parable of the workers in the vineyard tops the list for most people. In fact, it’s such a difficult parable that when I didn’t preach about it last week and, instead, looked at the manna story, I decided to come back to it today. So, those of you who noticed that we had the same gospel reading last week and this week, you get extra credit.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” The land owner agrees to hire those laborers for the usual daily wage, then goes back four more times as the day wears on and hires more people to work, the last laborers working barely an hour before the day is over. And all are paid the same wage. Gotcha! Truth time here. How many of you are made uneasy by this parable? You’re in good company. Most of those who struggle with this teaching articulate that It’s not fair. It discriminates against those who are long-term faithful. It gives no incentive or reward for those who work long and hard. Does that about cover it for you all?

So what’s interesting about how this parable functions is that pretty much all of us, like those in Jesus’ original audience, we make a lot of assumptions when we hear this parable without really noticing the assumptions we are making. Let me point out some of those assumptions to you. First, most people, we find ourselves immediately relating in this parable to the workers who went out in the early morning and worked all day. Have you ever thought about that, how that’s a choice we make without even thinking about it, to see ourselves as those hard-working 7:00 a.m. folks as opposed to the 5:00 p.m. workers. Why do we assume that we would be in that one group and not one of the others? Why don’t we see ourselves

in the 9:00 a.m. or noon or 3:00 p.m., much less the 5:00 p.m. group? But we don't. We go straight to the earliest of the workers.

More than that, the other assumption we make without even thinking about it, is that there's something better about those early workers than the others: they were chosen first because they were more capable or stronger, more able or somehow more morally worthy. Again I would ask, why do we make that assumption instead of, for example, thinking that a large group of workers was gathered outside in the morning; after the landowner made his first choice, those who were left were disappointed, but they made the brave and/or desperate choice to stay there standing in the hot sun waiting for hours in the hopes that someone might come back and choose them for some sort of work. Why don't we think that maybe those passed-over folks spent most of their day not working, yes, but what they did was worse, because they stood out in the heat with nothing to do but worry whether they and their families would eat that day and whether they would go home that night humiliated because they had been unable to find work. Isn't it interesting the assumptions we make and don't make with a story like this? And we don't even realize we've chosen a point of view, a perspective, a moral elaboration of what's going on in this story and therefore we don't question the accuracy or the intention of our perceptions.

Why do we make the assumptions we make? I think Jesus would say that we make them because we are citizens of the kingdom of the world. We, like Jesus' original audience, live in a world view that purports at some basic level to operate on a system of fairness and deserving. And in the kingdom of the world, we have built, and continue to build and define, all sorts of structures and frameworks of meaning to help us determine what is fair and who deserves what. Now I don't want to imply here that the kingdom of the world, or the investment we make in fairness and deserving, is necessarily bad. It's not. The kingdom of the world teaches us that honesty is better than dishonesty, that there are rewards for studying or working hard, that as we live in the world, what we get from it in large part is determined by what we put into it. There is truth in all of this. So we struggle, for example, to find fair ways to determine and reward student and worker competence, to share the burden of taxation, to discriminate between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. And many of us do this with all the good intention in the world. But—you knew there was a 'but' coming here, didn't you—but even our best models of fairness and deserving, like our response to this parable, are often based on assumptions we don't even realize we are making, assumptions that may be prejudicial or self-centered or just plain wrong. And then, beyond that, questions of fairness and deserving themselves often prove ultimately slippery and relative.

How much really of what we are and what we make is based on what is fair and what we deserve? For example, did we deserve to be born here and not in the Sudan where all of our efforts every day might be directed just towards getting food to eat and trying to stay out of danger's way? Do we deserve to be born with more or less intelligence, more or less marketable skills? Is it fair that having an arm that accurately delivers a 90 mile an hour fastball is compensated better than having a gift for teaching special needs children? Is it fair that some people are born more physically attractive than others? Is it fair that we care more about our security, our needs, our children than we do about the rest of the world? And based on all the above, do we really think, REALLY think, that if we were judged on God's standard of fairness, we would end up as those 7:00 a.m. workers who did the most and deserved the best? The more we look at this parable, and through it, the assumptions of our hearts and our lives and our culture, the more questions arise, and the more we are brought to examine our own values and commitments and our own

deserving and whether we would be glad if God operated by the rules of the kingdom of the world and treated us “fairly”.

But the good news, proclaims Jesus, the good news is that the kingdom of heaven is not based on our worldly notions of fairness and deserving. The kingdom of heaven is ruled by God’s generosity. For me, the most compelling line of this teaching of Jesus, the line that often gets missed as we examine our calculations and objections to this story, is this: “Are you envious because I, God, am generous?” Are we envious because God is generous? What does it mean for us to come to terms with God’s generosity, a generosity that includes and values all? Even those who do not work long hours and even those who think they are worthy of preferential treatment. God welcomes us all, and invites us to share in the abundance of God’s kingdom.

I would hope that our first response to God’s graciousness is a sense of thanksgiving. God who knows, in the words of an old prayer of confession, “that we are more concerned with the few who have more than us than with the many who do not”; God who knows better than us all the problems with the fairness and deserving paradigms of the world; God who knows not just what we have done, but also all that we have not done: that God still welcomes us home. And if that’s not a cause for rejoicing, I don’t know what is. But beyond our thankfulness, with his words, “Are you envious…” Jesus hopes to strike a chord in a perhaps underdeveloped part of our hearts. What if in the kingdom of the world we began to operate like in the kingdom of heaven? What if instead of our careful calculations about each person’s deserving, we just assume that all deserve to share in the fruits of the kingdom. What if, instead of working for fairness, we were to insist on generosity in our families, in our social structures, in our politics? What if? Are we envious because God is generous? Then let us meet God’s gifts with an answering generosity of our own. Thanks be to God. Amen.