

The World Turned Upside Down
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Matthew 20:1-16

Do you remember your first job? The day after I turned 16, I got on my bike and pedaled furiously to my local McDonalds, where I was hired on the spot. It was, overall, a positive experience. I mostly worked the grill. My managers were reasonable, my co-workers were amiable, I learned some structure and discipline and was paid, if I remember correctly, \$2.35 an hour.

I thought about that experience in light of today's gospel lesson. Imagine this slightly embellished scenario...*I show up for my shift, in my navy blue polyester shirt and pants, my paper cap, prepared to make Big Macs and Filet-O-Fish and Happy Meals. I work hard. About halfway through the shift, my manager Dave introduces a new co-worker. No interview. No training. He just gets to work. Then later, as I am watching the clock, counting the minutes down until I can punch out, another new person shows up. Same story.*

Finally, the shift is over. I am ready to punch out, head home, and perhaps even spend a little of my hard-earned money on whatever 16-year-olds spent their money on back then. Manager Dave calls us together and gives us our paychecks. We open them, as people do, and compare. All three, the same. Exactly the same. What the what, I think to myself! I worked harder, longer, maybe even better. Yet the pay – exactly the same. How unfair is that. I go to Dave to complain, but he will hear nothing of it. We paid you what you were owed, what you earned. I hop on my bike – I can't afford a car on \$2.35 an hour – and pedal away, furious, at the sheer unfairness of it all.

That is the parable we've just heard from Matthew's gospel. Let's hear its conclusion again:

“And when they received it (their pay), 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."

Charles Cousar (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, pages 493-495) writes that this is "a vivid and even abrasive story... The owner's action upsets the whole arrangement of societal order..."

This is, in the epic words of "Hamilton," the "world turned upside down." Depending on our context and story, that can be a profound comfort, or it can be an extraordinary provocation. Or both.

Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock write that "The parable is upsetting because it functions to challenge and reverse conventional values, including the sense of justice and fairness..." (*The People's New Testament Commentary*, page 80)

"Are you envious because I am generous?" That's the question, isn't it?

Jill Duffield writes: "Yes, I am. If I am being honest, I am envious because God is generous. Even though I have been given everything I have been promised, much of which I do not deserve, I am envious when I perceive that someone else is getting what could (should?) have been mine."

You can sense the outrage jumping off the page. "That's not fair, that's not fair." Not that any of the children that any of us have raised would say that, but it's as if we gave unequal allowances, or created imbalanced chore lists. "It's not fair."

The parable is spoken to the first group, the group first hired. They even speak in the story. So perhaps we presume we are in that group, and perhaps we are.

Jill Duffield continues: "When we hear this story, most of us assume we're the ones at the front of the line - the ones who went to fields early, worked diligently all day and got our agreed upon wage and then felt stiffed when those idle ones came late and got the same payment we did."

"It's a reasonable expectation," David Lose writes, "that if people who had worked only one hour received a full day's wage, then those who worked all day

would receive much more?...This must seem to them so utterly unfair...And so resentment, rather than gratitude, now grabs hold of them.”

Lose continues: “It’s all too easy...for us to dismiss these laborers as ungrateful or selfish ...But...their reaction is almost exactly what most of us would have felt had we been in their shoes. Because what happens to them simply does not add up and so doesn’t seem fair.”

There is certainly the very real and human issue of fairness. Whether the full-day workers have a legitimate complaint or not, can we not imagine ourselves echoing that sentiment?

And think about this even more – the target of the complaint. “They grumbled against the landowner,” Jesus says. (Here, scholars say that the translation of the Greek into “grumble” undersells the point. One translation likens it to something like “smoldering discontent.”) They grumble against God, and while God can take it, it’s as much of a perspective on how the full-day types perceive themselves, and others, and understand grace, as how they see God.

Karoline Lewis writes: “You think your privilege will make a difference? Will matter? Of course you do. That’s human nature. That’s human sin...”

Many scholars make the move toward grace, the promise that we are accepted by God – unearned, unmerited. The full-day workers, us, perhaps, think that we earn, deserve what we get. That is not grace. They also think that the eleventh-hour workers do not deserve what they get, and while blaming the landowner they also seem throw shade at the workers, for their idleness, laziness. That is also NOT grace.

- Put in the church context, this is not about who pledges more, who volunteers the most, who shows up at all the meetings.
- In a cultural, ethical context, this is not about who is born with the most advantage, privilege, a racial or financial leg-up, who fits in, who looks the part.

If we find ourselves in that first group, if we are confident in the promises of God or have an assured place at the table, be grateful. And be mindful of the potential trap that can lead to a sense of entitlement or privilege or resentment.

Because midday and eleventh-hour workers matter. The boss cares about them. Ninety-nine sheep and one sheep, remember? The prodigal son, remember? We cannot look down at them at all.

Davis Lose writes: “Let’s...put ourselves in the place of the workers who were chosen last. That excitement only multiplies when the manager unexpectedly and inexplicably pays them for a full day! I suspect that equal measures of relief, joy, and gratitude suddenly coursed through their veins as each received their payment.”

Their joy should be our joy, an opportunity for compassion and gratitude, and a strong reminder that the fairness question is really a question about justice.

Not only do we *not* look down at them. This parable invites us to look closely and honestly at ourselves, because while we might presume ourselves to be in that first group, we also hear a clear “not so fast.” What if, in our own life experience, we find ourselves unable to show up at the start of the day? What if, for reasons internal and external, we perceive ourselves as unacceptable? What if we find it difficult or impossible to believe grace, believe that any boss would ever want to hire us? And what happens when those feelings, that sense, become magnified during this season of pandemic?

This is not some condescending “there but for the grace of God go I” superior attitude. It is, rather, the profound realization – whether you are in the first group or the last, whether you have it pulled together or not, whether your spiritual house is in order or not – that grace is for me. The boss chooses me. Me.

As a business school case study, we can question the landowner’s practices. Alan Brehm writes that “This part makes no sense if you’re trying to run a business. Think of it—if you tried to run a business on the basis of paying everybody the same thing regardless of how well they worked, your business wouldn’t last very long.”

But it's not a business school case study. Brehm writes "The story of the workers in the vineyard insists that in the kingdom God envisions, the realm in which God's justice and peace and freedom defines life for all people, there is nothing to earn. In a very real sense, we are all 'eleventh-hour workers,' regardless of what we may have done. In this kingdom, everyone receives the generosity of God's grace, God's unconditional love, and God's unfailing mercy."

From one perspective, the world is turned upside down. From another, it has turned and turned, and it has come down right.

That good news helps us live in our own skin and helps us live in the world much differently – no resentment, no entitlement, no privilege. Rather, gratitude – for what we have received and for what others have received and will receive, the extraordinary and free gift of the grace of God, that whether first or last or somewhere in between, you are accepted, we are accepted, all are accepted, by a gracious and accepting God. Accept that for others and accept that for yourself. It will make all the difference. Amen.