

“Faith in a Just God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 20, 2020

Matthew 20: 1-16

One of the things I’ve noticed about my drive in to work and back home in the evenings is that traffic is not heavy like it was before March. Have you noticed that, too? We live up by The Pyramids around Michigan Road and 86th Street. Usually in the afternoons, it is jammed up at that intersection from 4:00-6:00pm. But even now – six months after this pandemic began – the traffic is hardly ever that bad. I’ve seen that at other points of my commute to and from the church.

There are two reasons I can think of for this reduction in traffic. One is that more people are working from home than prior to the middle of March. With the increased use of technology, many workers can be more flexible with covering their responsibilities outside of a central office. As a result, they don’t need to get in their cars and drive to an office building or workplace. Of course, that isn’t the case for everyone. But for a lot of people, they have been able to work from home, save money in commuting costs, and for some employers, they are finding that their employees are actually more productive and efficient with this arrangement.

The other reason is more concerning and alarming, and that is that so many people have lost their jobs since this pandemic began. Once we went into lockdown in the spring, many places like restaurants, hotels, and other hospitality-related businesses could not keep their employees on the payroll. And then, once we did start to open back up, those same businesses have not been able to open at full capacity due to social-distancing guidelines. While we have seen improvement in the unemployment rate since this pandemic began, it is going to be a long time before we are back to the employment levels we enjoyed in February. Not until an effective vaccine is fully developed and distributed will such “normal” activities as dining in a full restaurant, or attending conventions, or yes, gathering for worship in a full sanctuary be possible.

What is heart-breaking about this situation is that for the large majority of people, they just want to work. There is fulfillment in doing a job, in feeling like you’re making a difference, in receiving a paycheck for that work. We want to be able to provide the basic necessities for ourselves and those for whom we are responsible. Yes, there is that American capitalist notion of making gobs of money and climbing the corporate ladder. But as the old saying goes, you never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul behind it. Money and possessions are tools that can be

used for so much good in this world, and for many of us, we simply want the opportunity to earn a living so we can share those gifts for the furthering of God's Kingdom on earth.

The other thing about work is that it impacts our identity as a child of God. Whatever our job might be - teacher, banker, construction worker, scientist, doctor, lawyer, factory worker, homemaker, gas station attendant, government worker - that occupation is a key component of who we are. Often times, it is how others identify us, know us, learn who we are and what our gifts are. When our job is taken away, or we are unable to work as we are accustomed to working, it hits us at our core. For millions of people during this pandemic, they are scared, afraid, and yearning for someone to come up to them and say, "Come with me, I have work for you."

In this parable that Jesus tells in Matthew's Gospel, that's the very first thing that caught my eye when I read it this week. The landowner gives work to those who wish to work. He starts with those who are present at the beginning of the day to work in his vineyard. Then, a few hours later, he finds others who were hanging around the marketplace without jobs to do, and he says, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." This happens again in the middle of the day and later in the afternoon, giving others work to do. Finally, at 5:00 in the early-evening, the landowner comes across more people without anything to do. "Why are you standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us." Instead of saying, "I've got a full workforce in the fields already," the landowner says, "You also go into the vineyard" (20: 2-7). For people who were filled with uncertainty and hopelessness, the landowner gives purpose and hope.

Of course, the rub with this parable is what happens at the end of the day for all of these laborers. Notice how the landowner changes things from the beginning: "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first" (20:8). In my mind, it would have made sense to pay first those who had started working first, but maybe that's just me! Instead, the manager starts paying those who were hired at 5:00. And what's placed in their hands is a surprise: a full day's wage. Those who worked for only an hour receive the equivalent of a full day's work - perhaps 10 hours' worth of pay. Those who were hopeless to find any work to feed their families are given an abundance that fulfills and provides.

Now, those hired at the crack of dawn are at the back of the line, and they see these latecomers walking past them with a full day's wage in their hands. You know what they had to be thinking: "Wow! If they got that kind of pay, we're going to be rich!" They start doing math in their heads, figuring up what the hourly-rate was for these latecomers, and multiplying it by the number of hours they put in. As they

approached the manager, they had to be thrilled and excited for what was about to be placed in their tired, worn hands.

And what do they receive? The same amount as everyone else – the usual daily wage. Can you relate to their grumbling? “These latecomers worked for an hour, and got paid the same amount as we did, who worked all day in the hot, scorching sun. How is this fair? How is this just?”

Charlotte Cleghorn writes: *How easily we can relate to the grumbling of the laborers who assumed that because they went into the vineyard early in the day, they would be paid more. Such dangerous assumptions can be in our closest relationships, within our work settings, within our congregations, within our national thinking. There is a saying, “Assumptions are planned resentments.” Whenever we assume anything, we set ourselves up for possible disappointment or even worse, as we set the other person, place, or thing up as the object of our disappointment, anger, or resentment . . .*

What we learn from this parable is that the landowner begins by giving everyone in the story work. Each of the laborers is unemployed and each is given work to do with the promise of pay. They all begin in the same situation but easily forget by the end of the day where they started. Their energy goes not to the fact that they have had work and are being paid but to the inequity they see. Envy becomes more important than what they have received. “Are you envious because I am generous?” asks the landowner (20:15).

Do we find ourselves envious of another’s gifts, talents, abilities, possessions, social status, and so forth? How often am I envious of others’ good fortunes? Envy can cause us to diminish our own gifts and talents and secretly to rob others of theirs. God is the giver of every good gift, whether it is ours or someone else’s.

This parable is essentially about the generosity of God. It is not about equity or proper disbursement of wages but about a gracious and undeserved gift. It is not about an economic exchange but, rather, about a bestowing of grace and mercy to all, no matter what time they have put in or how deserving or undeserving we may think them to be. God’s generosity often violates our own sense of right and wrong, our sense of how things would be if we ran the world . . . (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 94-96).

Listen again to how the landowner describes his just generosity: “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?” (20:13-15).

This is a story about the kingdom of God. This is a lesson about how God will act toward us when we are welcomed into the kingdom.

Our faith is in a just God, even though God's idea of justice is often upside down from what we assume it should be. In God's eyes, justice is about bestowing grace on those who the world leaves behind. In God's eyes, justice lifts everyone up as a beloved child of God, no matter the worth the world places on their lives.

The workers did not own the wages which they received. The owner of the vineyard owned the money he would distribute. The workers did not have clauses in their contracts which said that if others came along and were paid a full-day's wage, then they would be paid more proportionately. They had agreed with the owner for a full-day's wage, and that is what the owner gave them. The owner had every right to do with his money what he pleased. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Is not God allowed to do what God chooses with what belongs to God?

Grace is not a sentimental thing which we think we are singing about in hymns like "Amazing Grace." It is an eye-opening, shocking act of God which will turn your world upside down if you're not watching. God's grace is nothing we control, nothing we have a say in, nothing which we have a right to say may be unfair or unjust. If we're viewing this parable as unfair or unjust, perhaps we need to look at God's grace from a different perspective. For just as God has been gracious with each of us as God's beloved children, so too is God just and gracious to all of God's beloved children - whether they are first in line or at the very back.

The next time we start to grumble about someone getting more than he or she deserves, perhaps we should consider that person might have truly needed that gift, because of the heavy burdens he or she had been carrying. The next time we question the justice of those on the margins receiving what we assume is greater assistance than they deserve, perhaps we should remember how far in front of the line we are standing ourselves. The next time we make an assumption, perhaps we should put it aside, lest we turn that assumption into a planned resentment against our friend, our family member, our sister or brother in Christ.

And the next time we believe we know how God should treat us or our neighbor, perhaps we need to hear once again the words of our Lord: "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" (20:16).

Thanks be to God for the faith we have in our just and gracious Lord. Amen.