

Kingdom Economics

Matthew 20:1-16

“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."

Some years ago, one of my mentors related a story about his friend's rite of passage for his doctorate. As anyone who has undergone the ordeal will know, comprehensive examinations (as they are called) can be dicey and unpredictable. Your doctoral advisers are apt to ask you anything at all, and a false move or even an uncertain answer, in some places, can be costly to your academic aspirations.

In this instance, one of the examiners asked: What is the most important event that occurred in 1776? The most obvious response, as any schoolgirl or boy would know is the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When my friend's friend supplied that answer, however, the examiner begged to differ. The most significant occurrence of 1776, he countered, was the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, by Adam Smith, that manifesto of capitalism that signaled the transition from a moral economy to a market economy and did indeed transform the West.

After the turmoil in the financial markets in recent months, this may not be the ideal Sunday to invoke the "dark science" of economics. But the Gospel reading this morning invites such ruminations.

A landowner needed some day-laborers for his vineyard, Jesus said, so he headed down to the place where the workers were milling around hoping for employment. The landowner put several to work and then returned for more laborers later in the day and then still later, toward the end of the work day. And then when it came time to settle the accounts at day's end, the landowner did the unthinkable: He paid them all the same wage, regardless of how many hours they had worked.

Ever since Adam Smith's publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, capitalism has become so pervasive that we have come to believe it enjoys something close to divine sanction. And this is especially true following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of socialism. We are so accustomed to thinking in capitalistic terms that anything different offends our sensibilities. How could the landowner possibly pay all of his laborers the same wages even though some had worked more hours than others? That isn't right. And what about the poor schlub who put in a full day's work? Why should he receive the same pay as the guy who showed up just before happy hour? Wait 'til the union steward hears about this.

I preached on this text a couple of years ago in Rollins Chapel at Dartmouth College. Afterwards, one of the chaplain's assistants, a recent seminary graduate, pulled me aside and said, "I don't like that text; the story should have ended differently." Aside from the arrogance of presuming to rewrite the scriptures, my interlocutor utterly missed the meaning of the text. It's not a story designed to extol the virtues of free-market capitalism or counsel a landowner about how to meet his payroll.

The Gospel lesson this morning, in fact, suggests a very different reckoning from what we've come to see as normative. Jesus is not offering a lecture on free markets or economic theory. He's talking about kingdom economics and about the theological doctrine of grace.

The context here is important. This story appears at a time in Jesus' career when his radical message that love trumps law was beginning to reach beyond the Jews and to the Gentile community. So the notion of Gentiles sharing the message of the gospel, the "good news," would have struck the Jewish followers of Jesus as unfair and as an affront to their sense of entitlement.

But Jesus makes it clear that the kingdom is open to everyone, that no one owns grace or redemption or righteousness. Nor is it a matter of earning one's salvation. Our place in the kingdom of God does not depend upon how hard we work or even when we show up for work; it's not a meritocracy,

for if it were we would all fall short of the mark. No, we participate in the kingdom of God not by virtue of our own merits but by the grace of God.

This understanding lay at the heart of Martin Luther's quarrel with medieval Roman Catholicism. Luther, an Augustinian friar, couldn't escape a sense of his own unworthiness before God. He was forever trotting off to his confessor because he feared that any unconfessed peccadillo would bar him from the gates of heaven. In time, and through a careful study of the New Testament, Luther came to see medieval Catholicism as a scheme of what he called "works-righteousness," where individuals sought to earn their salvation by attendance at the mass, works of charity, self-denial or embarking on pilgrimages.

On the basis of his reading of the New Testament, however, especially the epistles of St. Paul and Gospel lessons like ours this morning, Luther came to a different understanding. We belong to Christ not by virtue of our own merits, or because we have earned our place in the kingdom of God, but because of the miracle of grace. This insight, what Luther called his "rediscovery of the gospel," prompted his reluctant break with Rome and fueled the Protestant Reformation.

The gospel, the "good news," is not a transaction that can be understood in economic terms. It is not something we earn through our own merits or by virtue of hard work. And Luther found great relief in that because it freed him from the burden of earning his salvation.

No, the gospel, the "good news," is a gift far out of proportion to the worthiness of its recipient, just as the landowner in today's lesson chose disproportionately to reward the worker who showed up just before happy hour. The gospel cannot be understood in economic terms, much less according to the principles of capitalism. The grace of God defies all understanding. And we are left simply to scratch our heads at the wonder of it all and live into our status as God's people – not as an entitlement, not as

something we've earned, but as grateful recipients of the landowner's largesse.

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Christ Church
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