

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

SEPTEMBER 24, 2023



RIGHT?

RIGHT

and the wrongness of individual gain

by Drew Downs

Our understanding of what is “right” is situational. Some stuff endures. Like being honest or generous. Other stuff is dependent on the scenario. Most often, we measure the situational by personal responsibility.

Of course, there is no true measure of responsibility. It is the amorphous concept connecting human agency with appropriate expectations. In short, how hard did we work to make things work?

Responsibility is like X in an algebra equation. It ends up being whatever we need to solve for. And we use it to condemn people for their poverty and justify others for their personal accumulation of wealth.

When Jesus reminds us that accumulating wealth for individual gain is *wrong* and that generosity is *right*, we confront just how much of our thinking is guided by a sense of fairness that isn’t actually fair *or right*.

ORDINARY TIME

2023

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Right or Fair?

This week's gospel confronts how we approach the very ordering of our world. And while that could be said of literally any other passage in scripture, there's a particular reason this one is so biting.

Money. Jesus confronts us about money. And this reveals something deep about us in the west in the 21st century that this hits us way harder than any other.

I'll admit to a particular glee in wrestling with this week's gospel passage. Because of the responses it *always* brings out.

What we hear in it is that the landowner isn't being fair. We calculate the wage something like

daily wage = hours x hourly rate

and Jesus offers

daily wage = daily wage

I'm confident he knows how we get hung up. And why it hits us so hard. But he's not the one who brought up fairness. We did. He talked about what was right. And the right thing is to ensure everybody gets fed.

Fairness doesn't ensure rightness. It ensures hierarchies, division and suffering. It doesn't just allow poverty, but creates it. Abiding fairness can literally kill. But doing what is right? That often leads to generosity, hope, and restoration. Things that are good.

With love,
Drew

ORDINARY TIME

2023

FOR SUNDAY

Proper 20A

September 24, 2023

Collect

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "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."

ORDINARY TIME

Reflection

This parable is designed to make us squirm. And it has been making people of faith squirm for countless generations. Because it correctly assumes we'll be stuck on what is fair—while Jesus is telling us that we've got it *wrong*.

Our sense of fairness is encoded with work and wealth accumulation. We think volumes will vary: more work equals more reward, less means less. We should know that this isn't the only way to see the situation; it isn't the only measure of fairness. And sometimes we get that. But the dominant view is about wealth as reward.

Jesus tells this parable to trigger our assumptions. He knows most of us will sympathize with the workers who showed up early. After all, most religious people are of the go-get-em variety. And he also knows that there are those who also know the unabashed generosity of unearned grace. So they'll hear the landowner as doing what is right.

The delicate heart of this parable, however, comes at the last gathering of workers, near the end of the day. The landowner asks why the workers are still there and they say that no one will hire them. Treating this as true [throw off skepticism as the starting point] and we see exactly why the landowner's generosity is **right**.

Neighbors are leaving their neighbors to starve. Without a day's wage, there is no food that day. And in this parable, countless people are being refused work. Not because of laziness. Or because the jobs don't exist. Or any other skeptical assumption we can make to blame the workers.

The landowner's generosity is **right** when the world's indifference is **wrong**.

Wealth isn't a reward for harder work. It is a demand to provide for others. And being in a right relationship with God and community is predicated on generosity.

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