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Imperfect Community- Unfair Generosity

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 - If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

Matthew 20:1-16 - "God's kingdom is like an estate manager who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. They agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work. "Later, about nine o'clock, the manager saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. They went. "He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o'clock. At five o'clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, 'Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?' "They said, 'Because no one hired us.' "He told them to go to work in his vineyard. "When the day's work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, 'Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.' "Those hired at five o'clock came up and were each given a dollar. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, 'These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.' "He replied to the one speaking for the rest, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?' "Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first."

Each day at 3:00 a.m., the men who have slept on the floor of the Border Farm Workers Center in El Paso begin to wake up. Soon the busses from the farms growing chiles and peppers in New Mexico will rattle into the parking lot. The overseers will step off the buses and look over the crowd hoping to work in the fields. Those who appear young, strong, and able will be chosen to get on the bus, while others will be left behind, hoping that another bus will soon arrive

needing laborers. These workers will toil until evening under the hot Southwestern sun, usually earning far less than minimum wage. The days are long, but there is no overtime pay, and the work is dangerous, but there is no workers' compensation or health insurance. "I'm angry," said Cesar Chavez, "that I live in a world where a man who picks food for a living can't afford to feed his family."

Jesus's parable in Matthew 20 puts us squarely in that parking lot, indeed into every labor market and gathering place, perhaps even the parking lot of the Wawa in Red Bank, where men and women desperately needing work press forward, hoping to be chosen. At first, the parable appears completely realistic. A landowner shows up at the local labor pool early in the morning seeking agricultural workers. It is a scene repeated thousands of times every day around the world. But this is a parable, and soon it subverts our fixed notions of how the world works... and all attempts to make it obey the rules of the "real world" fall apart.

The first element that gets up-ended by the parable is the motive of the landowner. Sometimes when we hear this story, we just assume that the landowner repeatedly goes back to the marketplace because he needs more laborers to work the vineyard, but this is misreading the parable. Nothing at all is said about the need of the landowner. In fact, what is highlighted instead is the need of the workers. The landowner sees them "standing idle" and it is that sight which prompts him to offer them a job. We hear this happening in the dialog that occurs in the marketplace at day's end. "Why are you standing here idle all day?" the landowner asks the laborers who still remain. When they respond that they aren't working for the simple reason that no one has chosen them, he replies with a job offer, "You also go into the vineyard." In contrast to the text, our real world economy revolves around the needs of the bosses, *"We've got a heavy season coming up, let's hire a few more staff... We've got to cut our overhead, let's lay a few more people off..."* But this parable isn't bound by our worldly economics, and revolves instead around the need of the workers, not the need of the bosses.

The second thing that gets turned on its head by the parable is the compensation contract between the workers and the landowner. Those hired first feel that they are in a position to bargain, and so they negotiate to make sure they will be fairly paid. They strike a deal for a denarius each, the going rate for a day's work – barely enough for a family to survive on, just like today's minimum wage. But as the day wears on, negotiation disappears. The workers

hired in the middle of the day go merely on the landowner's assurance that he will pay them what is right and just. At the end of the day, the workers simply go to work on the summons of the landowner alone, no talk of compensation is had. Perhaps the diminishing bargaining is a sign of mounting desperation as the day grew shorter, but the fact remains that the later waves of workers go into the vineyard not on a contract but simply trusting the character of the landowner. Unfortunately, in the real world, trusting the moral character of agricultural overseers, or other corporate bosses, is usually confidence misplaced.

To enhance the drama of the narrative, the parable portrays the workers being paid in the reverse order of their hiring. The workers hired last, those who worked only an hour, were paid first and received a denarius, a whole day's pay. The workers who were hired first, observing this, naturally assumed they would get more for putting in a full day's labor. But when every worker got exactly the same pay, a denarius, the early workers howled, "This is unjust! I worked longer than they did... why should we get paid the same?!?! That's not fair!" The landowner responded in effect, "Don't you dare accuse me of injustice. We agreed on a denarius and I paid you a denarius. You got what we agreed upon – no harm, no foul."

Now this parable is not a blueprint for labor practices or economic systems any more than the Parable of the Prodigal Son is a class on parenting or the Great Banquet a manual of table etiquette. Any company that paid people who work one hour a day the same as it paid full-time workers would soon have a hard time finding employees willing to show up at nine. Even so, this parable works on our imaginations in ways that have profound implications for the marketplace and economic justice. It allows us to enter for a moment into an alternate world, one that operates on generosity rather than greed, ambition, and competition. It allows us to experience a world in which those who stand ignored, idle, and discarded by society are nevertheless of great value to God – worthy, regardless of their circumstances, to live with dignity each day. After letting our imaginations dwell in the surprising generosity of this parable and of God, we can no longer look at that parking lot filled with day laborers who are paid unjustly and who are viewed as disposable, and rest easy. I cannot see the multitude of immigrants in our communities, especially Red Bank, the parents of daughter's classmates, and not imagine the laborers still in the marketplace late into the day because no one offered them a chance.

This parable calls into question the way our world operates and how it devalues people and, let's be honest, exploits many who work long hours in appalling conditions so those in wealthier countries can have cheap products and services. It calls into question the assumptions of the privileged... "Are you envious because I am generous?" If we're honest with ourselves, if we found ourselves in the shoes of those who worked the full day in the fields, we'd have a hard time not shouting back, "YES! It's not fair! I deserve more... I worked ALL day! How dare you pay them the same as me?!" While it might feel unfair in the moment, the reality is that life itself has been unjust and unfair in different ways to those who are chosen last, and remember what Jesus says about the first and the last...

Maybe, this is what Jesus is trying to help us realize: that good news is not just for the privileged few but for all. The kingdom of heaven is like this, God seeks us all out and all are welcome, all are valued and respected, all are rewarded with life and hope. The question for us is how can we live out this Kingdom ethic in the midst of our real world economics? How is God calling us to live differently, to treat one another differently, so the conversation shifts from "what is fair", and "what is right", to "what would God's generosity look like here and now?"

And this day, as we pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," may we put those words into action, living out God's unfair generosity in our lives, our workplaces, our communities, and our relationships. Amen.