

however, betrays some of the bias we have about ourselves and our relative worth in comparison to others. Jesus is trying to teach us that real value isn't determined by things like a resume, a paycheck, or seniority on the job. In God's economy real value isn't found by climbing to the top of the corporate ladder, but by holding the ladder for others.

The context for this parable starts in the previous chapter where a rich young man comes to Jesus seeking assurance of eternal life (Matt. 19:16-22). He's been a good boy, obeyed all the commandments, and he believes this alone should shoot him to the top of God's list of favorites. But Jesus crushes his sense of self-worth when he challenges the young man to "*be perfect*" by selling his possessions, giving the money to the poor and only then following Jesus (19:21). This is an invitation to downward mobility but, ironically, it's often within that downward mobility that true satisfaction and worth are found.

Jesus teaches his disciples that it's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom because their worth is bound up in their possessions (19:23-24). A person might have the perfect pedigree and spiritual resume, but until they are willing to be generous toward others, both physically and spiritually, then they will remain outside the kingdom of heaven.

This troubles the disciples, who like many people in their day believed that wealth indicated God's blessing (19:25-26). Peter pipes up with the obvious question, "*We left everything and followed you. What then will we have?*" (19:27). Jesus assures the disciples that their dispossession of family, job, wealth and status won't go unrewarded. To be first in God's world, you must be willing to be last (19:30).

To illustrate this point, Jesus tells the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The harvest is ready and the landowner, serving as his own recruiter, comes to the marketplace to do some hiring. He starts with the early birds, the eager workers who probably have a good reputation for getting things done and with those who are ready to earn their bread. They agree on a wage and he sends them into the vineyard.

Still more workers are needed, so the boss returns to the marketplace at 9 AM, at noon, at 3 PM, and one final time at 5 PM. This last lot seems to have been a day late and a denarius short, given that they hadn't yet been hired after standing around idle all day (v. 6). But the owner hires them anyway. Jesus' hearers assume that each laborer would be paid a wage commensurate with the hours they worked. After all, that's only fair.

When it's time for the denarii to be distributed, the landowner calls the manager of the vineyard and tells him to start settling the payroll with the last group hired (v. 8). The shocking tale of the pay stub, however, is that they received a huge check for just one hour of work!

This is exciting. Just imagine the murmur going through the line. If these ne'er-do-wells who were lucky to get hired at all, got this very generous amount for an hour of work, imagine what the other workers will get for working three hours, six hours and nine hours! Yet, as the other workers approach the paymaster, they hear disturbing news. Everyone, regardless of hours worked, is getting the same amount. Totally not fair!

We can empathize with the early bird group who, having heard what the others were getting, expected to be paid more since they provided more relative value than the others. So, what do they do? The same thing we would do! They lodged a complaint with the foreman. They filed a grievance with Human Resources (vv. 10-11). They saw their labor as being worth more than anyone else's, especially those who showed up last.

But the landowner reminds them that they're getting exactly what they agreed upon first thing in the morning (v. 13). It's the employer's right to pay whatever wage he wants to the others. "*Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*" he asks. "*Or are you envious because I am generous?*" (v. 15). Thus, concludes Jesus, "*the last will be first and the first will be last*" (v. 16).

According to New Testament scholar Craig Keener, Jewish teachers used a similar parable to describe the day of God's judgment, but they used it to make precisely the opposite point that Jesus made. The people of Israel, who worked hard and were faithful for the long haul, would receive a high reward from God while the Gentiles, who came in much later, would receive little. Like the rich young man, many Jews believed that their spiritual resumes should give them priority status and a little something extra for their faithful labor over time.

But Jesus reveals that God's economy doesn't work that way. God chooses to be generous and extend the same grace to the least and the last as God does to those who are first and faithful. What's more, in the next few verses, Jesus reveals just how far he will go to identify with the least and the last, giving himself over to both pious Jewish leaders and cruel Gentiles and dying for them both.

Unhappy Servants

Sunday, October 7, 2018

Matthew 20:1-16

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In fact, Jesus' sacrifice for us is a good reminder for all of us on this World Communion Sunday. We say that we want God to treat us all fairly, but that's not really what we want at all. If God treated us fairly we would be dead because of our sin. "*For the wages of sin is death,*" said Paul (Romans 6:23). It is only by the grace of God, through the death of Jesus on the cross, that we are forgiven and redeemed. Fairness has nothing to do with it.

Following Jesus means joining him in the path of downward mobility. It means giving up our imagined privileges and recognizing our own insufficiency and our need for God's grace. It means laying aside our ambition for wealth and power and embracing a life of generosity. It means finding our satisfaction not in the wealth of our possessions but in the fewness of our wants. It means understanding that our ultimate worth is found not in our titles and power, but in our service to others (vv. 25-28).

If we're really working for Jesus, then we should be among the most satisfied of workers, no matter what our earthly profession. Whether we're digging ditches, or leading a Fortune 500 company, our ultimate satisfaction is found in giving our lives in the service of others.

This parable forces us to ask: What if we saw our jobs not as something to be endured, but as part of our vocation as followers of Jesus? What if we spent every day, not comparing ourselves to others, but doing all in our power to lift others up?

Jesus calls us to be part of a new workforce, a team that always needs our input, our investment, and our best: and all for the glory of God. Joining that team, no matter what our earthly profession, is the key to 100% satisfaction in our work!

Prayer: Lord, I give you all that I am this day. Brush away my weariness, so that I may be inspired in my work. Help me to discover new ways to reveal your love to all I meet. Keep my mind clear and focused on all I need to achieve and give me the wisdom to overcome difficulties and find solutions. I look to you and trust you are with me this day. Amen.

Sources:

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How many of you know this one: "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." That sentiment seems to resonate with many American workers. For many, work is a drudgery one must endure, rather than a vocation one can embrace. According to a 2016 survey, just 49.6% of Americans are satisfied with their jobs, which is highest that number has been since 2005. In an age when job hunting is highly competitive, just landing a job is a big deal. According to the numbers, it seems that liking the job you land is icing on the cake.

So, what's the biggest downer about going to work? According to another survey, it's not about the money. In fact, wages appear well down the list of employee gripes. What really makes the workday a bummer for many is the fact that their employers don't listen to them, don't really know them, and don't take their input seriously. Employees don't feel like they're invested in the company's mission and there's no sense of mutual benefit for employers and employees in determining goals and outcomes. In other words, employees don't feel as though they're part of a team: they're only worker bees who do what's required. It's the kind of thing that makes an employee feel like an interchangeable part in a machine. You are what you produce.

And then there's the relative value of one employee to another. As job markets get tighter and competition for jobs heats up, it's easy for workers to look around the other cubicles and compare themselves to their co-workers. That recent college graduate occupying the next cube might be making more than you, even though you have more experience, or might have the boss's ear in a way you never could. All of this doesn't seem fair at all.

Fairness is the root cause of all this dissatisfaction. Americans are obsessed with fairness. We want what's coming to us, or at least what we perceive we are "owed" for our work in terms of influence, value, and compensation. We want to be valued in a fair way. We especially want those who write our reviews and sign our checks to appreciate us fairly!

A disgruntled worker reading the parable of today's gospel would likely see it as typical of the way the system works. You grind out a full day's work and some Johnny-come-lately gets the same wage as you do for a fraction of the work. To read the parable that way,