

September 27, 2020
Matthew 20:1-16
“Divine Economics”
Michael Stanfield

‘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 market-place; 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.’

The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O lord, our rock and our redeemer, amen.

“I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.”

At no time in our history has this become more apparent than during the pandemic. When it comes to work, Covid-19 has changed everything, not least of which is how many people are now questioning the value of their work and the value of our whole system of working. For many these days, Covid-19 has uncovered how much work is a *drudgery one must endure, rather than a meaningful way to make a living that one can fully embrace.*

So what’s the biggest complaint about the workplace?

Well it is not the money. In fact, wages appear well down the list of things that employees tend to gripe about. What really makes the workday a pain for the employee is when their employers don’t listen to them, they don’t really know them and don’t take their input seriously. People who feel meaningfully connected to people they work with and their employer’s mission where they work are the happiest regardless of the pay.

In her TED talks, world renowned Sociologist Brene Brown reminds us that... “connection is why we’re here. It’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This,” she says, “is what it’s all about. It doesn’t matter whether you talk to people who work in accounting or social justice, mental health and abuse and

neglect, what we know is that connection, the ability to *feel* connected, is – neuro-biologically wired into us at birth – connecting is why we’re here.”

Yes – connecting with God – and others in a meaningful way – indeed it is why we are here.

So it is a sad state of affairs to learn how many feel disconnected from their place of work and the decision makers there. They feel they are only worker bees who do what’s required. It’s the kind of thing that makes any employee feel like an interchangeable part in a machine. You are a non-entity and are *only* what you produce.

And when connection becomes a luxury at a job? We compare. We look around and compare ourselves to our co-workers. That recent graduate occupying the spot right next to you might be making as much as you – even though you have a lot more experience – or she might have the boss’ ear in a way you never could. All of this just doesn’t seem fair.

When meaningful connection between what we are doing and how it is valued is taken away, we worry a lot more about what’s coming to us, or at least *what we perceive* we are “owed” for our work in terms of influence, value and compensation. It’s an odd but true fact that when real human connection is experienced where we spend most of our days, we worry about taking care of the mission of the place and our co-workers; take that connection away and we obsess about unfairness and getting the biggest piece of the pie we can.

And the fact is we live in the most disconnected culture on the planet.

A disgruntled American 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.

But to read the parable that way, betrays the bias we have due to our *own* disconnection and overlooks the gracious good news in the parable.

Because what Jesus is trying to teach us is that real value isn’t determined by things like one’s resume, one’s paycheck or one’s seniority on the job. In a God-centered economy, *real value isn’t found by comparing ourselves to others and then climbing over them to the top of the corporate ladder, but by holding the ladder for others because ultimately it really is all about meaningful, satisfying connection.*

One of the most imposing buildings on the campus of Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, is Kirby Hall, an ornate stone structure modeled after a Greek temple. Kirby Hall is named for Fred Morgan Kirby, a wealthy businessman who donated the money to build it in the late 1920s.

Mr. Kirby did rather well for himself. At the tender age of 23, he committed his life-savings of \$600 to purchase a variety store in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He had a partner in the venture, a man named Charles Sumner Woolworth. Together, they opened the first Woolworth’s “five-and-ten,” the cornerstone of a retail empire.

Mr. Kirby took an active role in designing the college building. He also specified exactly what sort of teaching would go on within its walls. There’s a dedicatory plaque just inside the entrance, declaring

that Kirby Hall is “for instruction in the Anglo-Saxon ideals of the true principles of constitutional freedom, including the right of *man* (no inclusive language back then), the right of man, to own property and do with it as he will; the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and, incidentally, the right to sell his labor as he chooses.”

Mr. Kirby was a Gilded Age captain of industry. He was anti-socialist and anti-union. He didn't want any so-called left-wing ideas taught inside *his* building.

Mr. Kirby also directed that something else be carved into that stone plaque: a Bible verse, Matthew 20:15, part of our morning text. In the King James Version it reads: “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”

Now, to Mr. Kirby that verse seemed the perfect biblical justification for the capitalist, free-enterprise system.

Turns out, the joke was on him. The Scripture verse he chose doesn't say what he thought it said.

No one ever explained to Mr. Kirby that the person who speaks that line in Jesus' “Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard,” is the landowner. And he's anything but a dyed-in-the-wool capitalist. What he does with his wealth has been described by many biblical scholars as downright socialistic. This is the boss who, at the end of the day, pays all his farm hands exactly the same amount of money, regardless of how many hours they've worked.

But I would argue that the landowner is not a socialist. A socialist is someone whose political ideals *require* those with more to give to those with less whether those with more would choose to do so on their own or not. The Landowner – he *gives* away his *own* money. That's not socialism; that's philanthropy. God is not a socialist. God is not a capitalist. God is a philanthropist – giving freely of Grace to all regardless of whether they have “earned it” or not – because in God's kingdom it's all about God's desire for connection with us – whatever the cost to God; one does not have to earn that connection; one does not have to compete for connection to God in Christ.

Deep, loving, genuine connection, regardless of its origin, is all grace and it is freely given or it is not connection. It is manipulation. In fact, believing we have earned what God gives us over against others, actually keeps us from connection and so it keeps us from being able to enjoy what we receive.

It is why professional athletes and famous actors or singers or others who have skills that allow them to perform at a high level from an early age often end up lonely and sad. Their whole life has been based on having earned their place in it. And in our culture they are worshipped for it. But worship and adoration for having “earned” your way to the top is no substitute for genuine connection. In fact, it is an impediment to it. There are so many examples here: Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Dwight Gooden, Michael Jackson, Lance Armstrong and the list goes on. They were all worshipped for earning their way into our hearts and they were (or are) all sad, tragic figures – every one.

Our morning parable falls on the heels of another tragic figure - the rich young man who comes to Jesus seeking assurance of the eternal state of his soul. He's been a good boy, believing he has earned his way by obeying all the commandments and amassing a fortune. Compared to others, this should shoot him to the top of God's list of favorites.

But Jesus crushes his sense of self-congratulation that is based only in comparison. He challenges the young man to “be perfect” by selling his possessions, giving the money to the poor and only then following Jesus. It’s an invitation to a downward mobility where ironically, true satisfaction and worth are to be found in common connection to everyone.

Jesus turns to his disciples and gives them the lesson that it’s hard for the rich to enter the ultimate spiritual joy of God’s kingdom because they are not connected to God and to people but to their possessions. A person might have the perfect spiritual resume, but until generosity toward others and gratitude towards God – no matter what one’s circumstance – becomes second nature, until one is truly able to say, “it’s only money and I can take it or leave it – but my connection to God and others – that means everything.” – until then, access to the timeless, eternal joy of God’s kingdom is all but impossible.

This troubles the disciples, who like many in their day believed that wealth was a sign of God’s blessing. So Peter pipes up with the obvious question, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will *we* have?” Of course this only shows how much Peter and the disciples still don’t get it as Peter is trying to argue that compared to others, he and his fellow disciples have earned their way into the kingdom by what they have sacrificed.

Still, Jesus assures him and the others that their dispossession of family, job, wealth and status is a step in the right direction towards the connective tissue of the kingdom; but it is obvious that more teaching is necessary.

So, Jesus tells this parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The harvest is ready and the landowner, serving as his own HR department, comes to the marketplace to do some hiring. He starts with the early birds who are likely the most eager workers and who probably have a good reputation for getting things done – or they really need the money. They agree on a wage and he sends them into the vineyard.

Still more workers are needed, so the boss returns to the Manpower office at 9 a.m., and again at noon, again at 3 p.m. and still again at 5 p.m. (Usually, work stopped about 6 p.m.) This last lot seems to have been a day late and a dollar short, given that they hadn’t yet been hired after standing around idle all day. The assumption that Jesus’ hearers would have had, as do we, is that the laborers would each be paid commensurate with the hours they worked. After all, that’s only fair.

When it’s time for the denarii to be distributed (in first century Palestine, laborers would have been paid at the end of each day), the landowner calls the manager of the vineyard and tells him to start settling the payroll with the last group hired. The shocking tale of the pay stub, however, is that they received a huge check for just one hour of work!

This is exciting. You can imagine the murmur going through the line. If these lazy, ne’er-do-wells who were lucky to get hired at all, got *this* huge amount for just an *hour* of work, no telling what they will get for working three hours, six hours and nine hours!

Yet, as the other workers approach the paymaster, they hear the strange news. Everyone, regardless of hours, is getting the same amount. Totally not fair!

According to New Testament scholar Craig Keener, Jewish teachers used a similar parable at that time to describe the day of God's judgment, but used it to make precisely the opposite point that Jesus was making. Those rabbis would tell parables where Israel, who had worked hard and been faithful for the long haul, would receive high wages while the Gentiles, who had come in much later, would receive little. These teachers, like the rich young man, believed that their spiritual resumes, compared to others, should give them priority status and a little extra for their faithful labor over time.

Peter himself ran into this problem after Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. He wanted to insist that Gentiles first become Jews before becoming Christians. It took a powerful dream from God to remind him about the message of this simple parable –that God's economy is not about earning and fairness. It's about connection, grace and love. God chooses to be generous and extend the same grace to the least and the last as God does to us responsible ones who think we've earned it. In fact, God often goes out of God's way to show the least and the lost that God desires a connection with them as much as with the spiritually perfect.

And in the verses that follow our parable, Jesus reveals just how far *he* will go to connect with the least and the last, giving himself over to both pious Jewish leaders and cruel Gentiles to die for them both. The point of all this is that following Jesus means letting go of any notion that we have earned something from God for which *God* now owes *us*.

It means giving up any notion that there is something special about us that makes us above average and therefore deserving of more than those who are average or below average – whether that has to do with our skills and intelligence or how much we have given of our time, talents and money to God's church over the years .

It means giving up the notion that because we have been faithful longer, we have a right to more say in how the church should look, and what direction the church ought to be going than those who are new to church life.

You know, we Euro-centric Christians have been around since the first century. But the fact is that the church is in decline among Eurocentric peoples. The fastest growing part of the church today is in Africa where the gospel has only been in existence in some places for a little over a hundred years. *We firsts* could learn something from those *lasts*.

And if we're really working for Jesus, we should be among the most satisfied of workers, no matter what our earthly profession at which we toil on a daily basis. Whether we're digging ditches or leading a Fortune 500 company, our ultimate satisfaction is found in connecting deeply with others as we give our lives away in meaningful service.

What if we saw our jobs not as something to be endured, but as part of our vocation as the connective tissue of Jesus?

What if we spent every day, not comparing ourselves to others, but doing all in our power to connect with others during this difficult time by lifting them up and giving them more than they think they deserve?

Especially now, Jesus calls us to be part of an interconnected team that always needs our input, our investment and our best – and all for the glory of the connective rule of God. Joining that team, no matter what our earthly profession, is the key to 100 percent job satisfaction!

Let us pray. Gracious God. Your desire to connect with us is so awesome at times that it scares us. We would rather keep you at arm's length and control our interactions with you and others. Forgive us. Take away our wining about fairness when we are already among your precious and privileged. Give us the courage to connect leaving our desire to earn our place in your good graces behind.

Now bless these gifts we give that they may help those who feel disconnected to experience the surprise and wonder of connection with others and you. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

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