

## The Difference Between Fairness and Justice

Readings 'Now is the Time' by Hafez  
from 'A Hard Death' by May Sarton  
'The Necessary Brevity of Pleasures' by Samuel Hazo

How do you talk about an ideal, a promised land, an aspiration that is not reached and we might not be able to reach? How do we, in this community that aspires to be 'a beloved community embracing and serving our diverse world' know what that actually means? How do we make that aspiration real for one another, feel it, know it in our bones, and see it, in parallel and in contrast to the world we live in.

Every prophetic community, every prophetic person has faced this challenge. Jesus was no different. He was trying to teach his people about a new way of being, a way of love and justice that was a radical reordering of what they knew. He could have philosophized, he could have described things directly. Instead he told stories, parables about places and experiences that would have been well-known to his listeners. Jewish prophets of the ancient Near East were experts at parables; parables – stories that start in the everyday, but end with challenge or provocation—are throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and the teachings of other Jewish prophets at the time of Jesus.

Today, I'm going to explore one of Jesus's parables with you, the one that I return to again and again, as it challenges me to better align my heart, mind, and actions with the values I claim to profess. It is usually called 'The Laborers in the Vineyard.' I imagine that someone of you know this story well and others will be hearing it for the first time today. Here it is.

Jesus was teaching a gathering of his followers, helping them envision his ideal, his aspiration for the world, what we could anachronistically call 'The Beloved Community,' what he called, 'The Kingdom of Heaven.' He told them, '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. (Matthew 20:1-4, NRSV)

Let's pause here for a moment and notice that line, 'I will pay you whatever is right.' What does that mean to you? These people are starting to work about three hours later than the first group. What would be the right amount for them to be paid for their shorter day of work? What is your expectation? What might have been the expectation of the people who heard this story for the first time?

Now let's continue, 'When [the landowner] 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. (5-9)

Let's pause here again, to note that the people who only worked for an hour received the full daily wage that the landowner had promised to the people who had been working for twelve hours, the standard agricultural workday at the time. Something really unexpected is happening. How do you think the other

people lining up for their wages might be feeling seeing the people who worked for such little time get so much money? Perhaps they are confused, perhaps they are starting to imagine their own good fortune. Now, let's return to the parable to see how it ends.

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. (10-16)

Like any good story or other piece of art, this parable can be explored and interpreted in different ways. I would argue the possibly for interpretation and reinterpretation is why this parable, and parables have endured for millennia. If Jesus was more straightforward with his teachings, saying simply, 'be kind' or 'be generous,' there would be a lot less for the preachers to do, much less possibility for exploration and meditation, and prayer on these passages.

In seminary, took a class with a scholar named Roger Haight who is a Catholic priest in the Jesuit order, the same order as the current pope. It was a class on the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius, spiritual practices that have been shaping the Jesuit order for centuries. It turned out to be the last class this man ever taught, as partway through the semester he was silenced by the Vatican because he had published a book that questioned Catholic Theology. That is a good story in itself, but not the story I'm telling today.

Learning the spiritual exercises of Ignatius was powerful for me. The piece that I want to share today is the practices of taking time to fully imagine a scene described in scripture. I would add the Unitarian Universalist addendum that it works well with other worthy texts, too. I regularly do this with poems too. I close my eyes and populate the world. Imagine the ground and the sky and the weather. What do people's faces look like? What perspective am I taking? Am I one of the characters or a distant observer? I try to switch perspectives and feel the feeling and think the thoughts of different characters. Who do I identify with most strongly? Why?

I find this act of imagining and perspective taking particularly useful for this parable. In the story of the laborers in the vineyards, who do you identify with? This parable has three main perspectives, the first workers, the last workers, and the landowner. Who do you side with? Who do you feel for?

How we identify, where we see ourselves in the story shapes our sense the meaning of the story. We will take time today to identify with the first workers, the last workers, and the landowner and see how taking the different perspectives and inhabiting the world of the story shifts our understandings of this teaching.

We begin where I always begin, with the first workers. I identify strongly with the first workers, the people who labored in the hot sun and earned just as much as the people who worked for only an hour. Perhaps it's because I'm the eldest child in my family of origin. Perhaps it's because I take pride in my work ethic, that I am able to get a lot done in a day – and that's informs my self-worth and sense of self more than I would like it to. Whatever the reason, I feel the anger of those first workers when they get paid just as much as the last workers. I feel the rebuke of the landowner when he says, "I am doing you no wrong." And "Are you envious because I am generous?" In my imagined role as a first worker, I am envious because of the generosity; it takes me a minute to remember that someone else getting more is not a personal

affront to me.

This is about having a mindset of scarcity or a mindset of abundance. Scarcity thinking tells us that there is not enough to go around. If someone else gets something, that causes us harm. So much of our culture reinforces the idea that there is not enough, that we are in competition with one another, that someone else's good fortune must come at our expense.

It is hard to step away from this and create another mindset, one of abundance. Abundance thinking is rooted in the certainty that there is enough of everything that matters most for everyone to have enough. There is enough love, learning, community, joy, and meaning. There is enough housing, food, and other tangible goods – we just aren't sharing them as we could. Our systems are designed to keep these necessities from being distributed evenly. Abundant thinking calls us to trust that, fundamentally, there is enough, and remember, when those first-worker parts of ourselves get to grumbling that good fortune is rarely a zero sum game. It is possible for everyone to have enough – and we are called to work to make that so. It doesn't create real justice to grumble; we need to look at systems and structures and work for transformation and reform. That is the message I tell myself when the first worker gets loud and obnoxious in me. I also try to remember all of those times and all of those things when I have gotten more than I might have strictly deserved. There are many of them. I claim a theology that all are inherently worthy – this grumbling is not that.

Now, let us shift our perspective to the last workers. What does it mean to identify with the people who are paid extravagantly for just an hour of work? Who earn as much in an hour as others earn in a day? The most popular way to interpret this parable now is as an allegory; each figure and action is a symbol for something else. Many Christians see the landowner as a symbol for God and the wages as a symbol for salvation. They argue that everyone getting the same wage means that it is not what we do, but what we believe that brings salvation. It is common to cast the first workers and the last workers as symbols of different groups. The first workers are the Jews and the last workers are Christians, in some interpretations. In others, the first workers are Catholics and the last workers are Protestants. Everyone always seems to cast themselves or their group as the last workers and whoever it is they are fighting with as the first workers, unsurprisingly. They use this story as a weapon and use it to beat up on their enemies.

Our Universalist ancestors had a more generous allegorical view of this parable. The Universalists were originally a Christian denomination who believed that everyone goes to heaven after death, no matter what, no exceptions. God is too loving to send anyone to hell for endless torment. They saw this parable as proof of God's endless love. Everyone gets wages, perhaps more than they deserve from the generous landowner. God's generosity with salvation extends to everyone, no matter how hard we work, no matter what we believe, no matter what. While our tradition is no longer defined by our ideas about salvation, this commitment to each person is echoed in our belief that each person has inherent worth and dignity.

Jesus didn't intend his stories as allegories. Most scholars agree that Jesus understood himself as a reformer within Judaism. Even if your understanding of Jesus allows for him knowing during his life and ministry that his teachings would lead to the creation of a new religion, he wasn't teaching coded messages that people could use centuries later to attack their enemies. The story of the laborers in the vineyard wasn't written down for a generation after Jesus taught it. If it was only an allegory to be used to bash an enemy in some far-future time, those first listeners wouldn't have bothered to commit it to memory, tell others, translate it into Greek from Jesus's Aramaic, and then write it down.

So what might this parable have meant to Jesus and his first followers, who preserved it? One of my

favorite sources for questions like this is a scholar named Amy-Jill Levine. Dr. Levine is a Jewish New Testament scholar who focuses on the Jewish context of Jesus's life and challenging anti-Semitic interpretations of scripture. She teaches at Vanderbilt University in Nashville and I knew her professionally when I served a church there. All of her books are good and fairly accessible for people not steeped in biblical scholarship. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* is her book on the parables, which I recommend to any of you who want to delve more into the historical context for the stories Jesus told.

Levine points out just how weird this story would have been to the first people who heard it. Why would the landowner keep going out to the square again and again to hire more workers? In the ancient world and now, employers usually know how many workers they need for a task. If someone is hiring day laborers, they would probably do it once, maybe twice if they completely miscalculate. This landowner does it five times. The listeners know this is strange and begin to suspect the landowner – or Jesus the storyteller – is up to something.

And then it gets stranger. The landowner pays everyone the same amount, whether they worked twelve hours, nine hours, six hours, three hours, and one hour. Levine argues that the most straightforward, non-allegorical reading is best. This is a story about a generous landowner. There are similar teachings from other Jewish sources of the era, including the challenging 'when a king hires good laborers who perform their work well and he pays them their wage, what praise does he merit? When does he merit praise? When he hires lazy laborers and still pays them their full wage.'<sup>1</sup>

This is the provocation and the challenge of this parable. It challenges the assumptions of the capitalist system. Levine argues that Jesus would have wanted his followers not to identify with any of the workers, but with the landowners. Jesus wants his people to use their power and their wealth generously to create the beloved community. Levine writes, 'the parable does not promote egalitarianism; instead, it encourages householders to support laborers, all of them. More than just aiding those at the doorstep, those who have should seek out those who need. If the householder can afford it, he should continue to put others on the payroll, pay them a living wage (even if they cannot put in a full day's work), and so allow them to feed their families while keeping their dignity intact. The point is practical, it is edgy, and it is a great challenge to [people] then and today.'<sup>2</sup>

If we are identifying with the landowner, how do we become generous like the one Jesus says is creating the Kingdom of Heaven, the beloved community. We need to set aside what we think is normal. We need to question what it means to be fair and what it means to be just and recognize that there is a difference between fair and just and we should side with justice. We are to seek out a deeper justice than what the customs of the world around us would call adequate. Jesus calls on people with means and power –and there is not one without some means and some power– to do more than the minimum, to make sure all can survive, to treat all with respect, care, and dignity.

It would be a disrespect of the parable, of the mode that Jesus chose to teach in, for me to now outline some specific policy position and say that is what this parable is calling us to do. Jesus didn't have specific policy proposals. He was concerned with generosity. He knew that the Kingdom of heaven, the beloved community, appears when people look beyond what is fair and what is customary to do the work of justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. New York: HarperOne, 2015. Page 217

<sup>2</sup> Levine, 218

He taught his followers to do more than is mandated to live into our ideals, to align our lives with our values, to create a more just world, to build the Beloved Community.

May we go and do likewise.

The art of the parable, of this parable, in particular, is that shifting our perspectives gives us three worthy, worthwhile teachings that challenge us to better live in line with our values.

May we seek to silence the first worker parts of ourselves that grumble and tell us this is a world of scarcity.

May we remember our Universalist ancestors who remind us that there is nothing we can do, no way we can be that makes us less worthy of love – and that is true for everyone else as well.

May we use our means and our power to create the beloved community.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.