



The Unfair, Unearned, and Lavish Love of God
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost A 9/20/20
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh LORD: *May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard. In the Name of Jesus Christ, the living Word. Amen.*

Just like last week, this week we have a challenging parable from Jesus.

As we know, parables are one of Jesus' favorite ways to instruct us, who try to be disciples, about the ways of God. And as we are reminded over and over again, the way God does things is not usually how we do things.

I remind us of what has become my favorite definition of a parable:

A lit, stick of dynamite, wrapped in a story. It's no accident that this definition comes from a man named Clarence Jordan, a New Testament scholar who, with his wife Florence and another couple, started an interracial community in Americus, Georgia, in the heart of the Jim Crow South in 1942. Talk about a stick of dynamite. Koinonia Farms remains a working farm, dedicated to living New Testament principles, and teaching non-violence and racial reconciliation. It sells delicious pecans and other gift items and welcomes visitors who want to learn about how they do things. Habitat for Humanity also got its start at Koinonia Farms in the 1960s.

Our parable features several shifts of day laborers, a manager, and a landowner, who invites the workers to come work in his vineyard. When the end of the day comes, the workers who show up just before quitting time get the same daily wage as those who had been slaving away since the crack of dawn. (This aspect of the parable reminds me of those annoying folks who habitually show up at the last minute when all the work has been done, and ask, "is there anything I can do to help?")

It should be noted that the Greek word under the phrase "the usual daily wage" is one denarius, a Roman silver coin. According to the most recent sources I've consulted, the value of this coin took care of the basic needs of a landless laborer in first century Palestine (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, Lewis R. Donalson, p. 93.) So, the first and the last of the labors get enough to meet their basic needs. We're not told why the different groups of workers arrive at different times. We don't know why the landowner didn't seem to know how much help he needed in the vineyard at the beginning of the day. We don't know why no one had invited the last group of laborers to work.

So, I wonder where the dynamite in the story got you? If you're like me, this story makes you a bit grumbly, like the first workers who arrived at the crack of dawn. We go right to the feeling of "that's not fair." The workers who showed up at the end of the day don't deserve the same wage as the workers who worked hard all day. The first workers *earned* their money. The slackers who came at the end of the day, however, *got away with not working*. What is that boss thinking?

But many of us are probably *also* thinking, in part, "I know I'm not *supposed* to think that. I'm evolved enough as a Christian to know that I'm supposed to see the landowner as God, and to be generous like God."



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And we'd be right about that conclusion. But we'd still be resentful. And, we'd also likely be thinking, "that's no way to run a business. And besides, the Kingdom of Heaven is for later."

Which misses the point of the story. And part of us knows that, too. So, the dynamite has blown everything apart, and we're not sure just how to put everything back together. And that's ok. Because we don't do the reassembly alone. At the heart of the resentment is that many of us think, I believe, that we are entitled to much of what we have in our lives, because we believe we have earned it. But I have to say, gently, with some trepidation, to myself, as well to all of us, that's not always necessarily so.

Some basic things that many of us take for granted are actually privileges that we have never really examined, because we haven't had to. For example, owning a home, that staple of the American dream for many millions of people, for many, many years. I wonder how many of us participating in this worship service, or reading this sermon later, who have taken out mortgages, ever considered the possibility, even for a moment, that we might not have gotten a mortgage because of the color of our skin.

To illustrate: the GI Bill, signed by President Roosevelt in 1944 toward the end of World War II, opened homeownership to millions of veterans through government-insured, low-interest, zero-down payment mortgages. Only a *tiny* fraction of eligible African American veterans received that benefit. For example, according to one study, in the years immediately after the war, in the New York and northern New Jersey suburbs, about 67,000 mortgages were insured by the G.I. Bill, but fewer than 100 were taken out by non-white veterans.

Katznelson, Ira *When affirmative action was white: an untold history of racial inequality in twentieth-century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006) via https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.I._Bill#cite_note-09, (accessed 2020.9.18)

Banks rarely underwrote mortgages in black neighborhoods; real estate brokers rarely showed homes in white neighborhoods to potential black buyers because of restrictive covenants and outright racism. Black veterans and their families weren't invited into the vineyard, so to speak; indeed, they were kept out.

And so, the greatest home owning boom ever in America, the greatest engine of intergenerational wealth transfer in our nation's history, was effectively closed to the greatest generation of African Americans. Though it has been illegal since the Fair Housing Bill of 1968, many studies show that the color of one's skin is still a problem when it comes to receiving mortgages even today.

I don't know about you, but Jamie and I bought our first house because our home-owning parents helped us with a down payment. And their homeowning parents had helped them. And no one looking at us hesitated to sell us the house we wanted. Jamie and I had also worked hard to save money. But we hadn't lifted a finger to be white.

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Now, I invite us to hear this parable in a different way, to see it through a different lens. And let me set that up for us this fashion: As a society, I believe, by and large, that we measure our worth, consciously or unconsciously, by the amount of money we make, the quantity of material goods we accumulate, by competing, comparing, striving, by collecting accomplishments, by being first. Life is something of a zero-sum game, we think.

And, as I suggested earlier, at times we hold on to the fantasy that what we have accomplished is primarily due to our own efforts. And by world standards, most everyone here this morning is wealthy; and even though living in the greater Boston is a serious challenge, most of us have enough. We are familiar with jealousy, however (the passage this morning uses the literal phrase in Greek for jealousy—"the evil eye"); We experience that jealousy. We experience what the Buddhists call "comparative mind."

And so, when we hear a parable about "earning" a living, perhaps these places are where we go: to proving our worth, to ideas of life as a zero-sum game. If someone else has, then I must not have. We begrudge what others may have.

But what if we made a simple substitution as we re-read this parable?

I got this idea from the chat feature on FB in an online preaching group I'm in. What if we substituted the word "love" for words having to do with money, hiring, pay, wages, transactions, comparison, order of worth, and so forth? Listen to this revised version of the Gospel lesson. How does it feel?

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to **love** (hire) laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily **love** (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 **love** (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 **loved** (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 **love** (pay), beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those **loved** (hired) about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily **love** (wage). Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more **love**; but each of them also received the usual daily **love** (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 **love** (wage)? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to **love** (give to) this last the same as I **love** (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 **loved** (first), and the first will be **loved** (last)."

What did that feel like? Doesn't that feel like what we really need?



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Isn't this parable really about love, our radical equality before God who lavishes love on us all? The first as well as the last, like any parent who loves all her children, no one more or less than any other? That there is enough, more than enough, for all? Remember how God gave manna and quail to the Israelites? There was more than enough.

While I'm sure that this parable is in part about the straight-forward economics of the marketplace, and that God desires that all humans have the dignity of work and a living wage, I think it's also about the radical, lavish, overwhelming, and "unfair" love of God for **all**. God wants to **love all people** into the Vineyard. The question for us is, do we?  
**Amen.**