

“ENVIABLE GENEROSITY”

Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

The parable’s ending is harsh. “You worked all day?” asks the landowner. “Well, you got what you signed up for. First last, last first, thank you, bye.” Door slams. The guys in the back of the line were waiting in the marketplace first thing in the morning. They’re up before the sun. Closing time comes. They get a day’s wage. Those hired at the end of the day? Plucked one row of grapes before the bell sounded. Their pay? Also, a day’s wage. Not. Fair.

I wonder if you know the feeling. How many of you wake up before the rooster’s wiped the sleep out his eyes? You work, you stress, you make ends meet, somehow. You survive. Meanwhile, the guy on the other side of the hall props up his feet for the same pay.

Perhaps women know this parable more intimately than men, in a country where women make, on average, 79¢ for every dollar men make doing the same job.

Or do you have siblings? You followed all the rules. Good grades. Never snuck out. Home by the 10:00 curfew. Then little sis, little brother come along, and, “Hey, how come their curfew’s at 11:30?”

How many of you have suffered to prepare a beautiful holiday spread— intricate recipes and casseroles and special desserts? When who gets the credit but the ones that spent a *whole* hour frying the turkey? “Oh my, who did the turkey? This is *so* good.”

“This is my favorite parable!” said no one ever. Because everyone knows what it feels like to be treated unfairly, especially when it comes to being compensated unfairly for doing a job well. Isn’t that what happens here? Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who provokes his hardest workers into a state of simmering resentment.

In a painting called “The Latecomers,” artist Jesus Mafa depicts the scene in the vineyard. The sun is about to set. You see the early laborers in the foreground, their shirts off, bent over, pickaxes tilling the ground, faces grimacing from exhaustion. A half-acre behind them come the new workers, flat-bellied limber-backs, not a bead of sweat. And there’s the landowner, standing tall, dressed in pristine white, pointing across the field.

Imagine you’re in the back of the line at the end of the day. You’ve been working so hard you’re starting to smell yourself. Those who worked the least are up ahead of you. They get paid first. You overhear the amount. Then a flurry of whispers. A day’s wage! Can you believe it? They hardly worked an hour! Then logic kicks in. If *these* who just arrived are getting that much, imagine how much *we’ll* get! You quickly begin figuring the difference. “Okay, that guy was here less than an hour... denarius... times 12...carry the one...We’re about to get two weeks-worth!”

To make matters worse, when they grumble against the landowner, he gives them a sanctimonious speech. “Look, it’s my money. Can’t I do what I want with my own money? I’m a job creator!” It makes you wonder if Jesus cuts the parable off before the workers take him out. Which reminds me, part of the Greek word for “landowner” is...*despot*.

On the other hand, we can get carried away with trolling this landowner. For one thing, he isn’t barking orders from his yacht on Labor Day. He is relentless in his determination to employ idle people, traveling back and forth to the marketplace all day. As well, he does at least pay the longest working laborers the exact amount he said he would. Just for that, he skips to the head of the line of so many bosses today, who employ their creativity towards paying their workers less. We certainly can’t compare him to the boss who compels you to work part time so he won’t have to pay benefits. After all, the landowner honors his word to those he hired later in the morning. “I’ll pay you whatever is right,” he says. And he exceeds their expectations. We cannot lump him in with the greedy robber barons of our time, who sit on unconscionable amounts of wealth, while calling themselves benefactors. After all, the landowner doesn’t seem all that attached to his money, which he showers generously upon the late workers. And we can’t compare him to the boss who looks the other way when his employees and their families go without proper clothing, or go hungry, or lose their homes. After all, he is paying them a living wage.

From these angles, we begin to see the early risers’ grumbling as unjustified. The landowner gives them a just wage. Isn’t that enough? He also gives the latecomers enough. It’s as if the grumblers are saying, “Hey, you gave them more enough than you gave us!” But isn’t enough enough? Can you get less infinity than someone else? “You gave that guy more infinity than me!” “Sorry, this is all the infinity I have.”

I’ve heard it said that to be jealous is to covet something you once had but no longer have. We often hear God described in the Old Testament as “a jealous God,” because God wants his people back. The Israelites disobeyed God, and God is jealous to have them back. But to be envious is to covet something you’ve never had before. This is why the landowner asks, “Are you envious?” Because his giving stands out. It’s extraordinary. The laborers have never seen generosity like this.

When God calls the Israelites in the wilderness to gather manna each morning, some of the gatherers end up with baskets overflowing, while others’ baskets have room to spare. But when they weigh their baskets, they each weigh the same. “Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed” (Ex. 16:17).

But if this landowner is ever going to win back our full appreciation, we’d like to know the answer to one lingering, puzzling question... Why does the landowner line the workers up in this order, so that the hardest workers have to suffer his puzzling generosity to the latecomers? By paying the latecomers last, the ones who were there at the earliest hour end up being the last ones to leave. The landowner purposefully drags out the experience for them. What kind of landowner is this, who ropes his workers into a long wait for what will certainly be a grudging reaction?

To the latecomers, he gives tenfold or even a hundredfold the wage they were expecting. It's the good nature of this landowner to give far more to the latecomers than they could expect. But perhaps it is also the nature of this landowner that he wants to give the early workers something even better than a day's wage. He also wants to give them the freedom to be like him—that is, to take joy in the good fortune of the latecomers. The landowner gives the early risers an opportunity to be just as generous as he is, by rejoicing in the unfairness of it all.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus says, "If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" Beginning with our eyes, God has designed our bodies to rejoice when we see everyone receive the gifts of God. In this parable, the landowner positions us for just such a celebration.

The day I turned 30, Erin threw a surprise party for me. We'd just moved to Durham, where many friends and family still lived. Somehow, she'd gathered all these dear people without my knowing. I thought we were going out to eat for my birthday. Then I walked into a room full of people I dearly loved. I had suspected nothing. It was a most memorable and celebratory occasion. She really got me. ...But what if, when I walked into the room, my friend Andrew had said to his wife Blair, "You've never given *me* a surprise party!" Or if Patrick had said to Tracy, "What gives? Why haven't you ever done this for me?" We could say that sort of reaction would have killed the mood.

I wonder, though, if this parable is simply a surprise party gone awry. The landowner sets up the room so that everyone can celebrate his generosity to the latecomers. But when the lights shine on his generosity, the people grumble. It makes you want a do-over.

Well, guess what. We do get just such a chance. The parable happens every Sunday, right here. The early risers gather with the latecomers. The landowner lines us up to throw each one of us our very own surprise party. One by one, we stand before him. And he says to each of us, "Now, compared to the others, you haven't done all that much. So, what you're about to hear may sound unfair..." Suddenly, there is a buzz of electricity from the sudden switching on of the lights, a generous congregation erupting with cheers, shouts of surprise, and grace raining down like confetti...

...In unison, the saints surround you to say, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow!"

Finally, it hits us. This whole time, what our generous God intended church to be: a rollicking surprise party for the undeserving people in the front of the line.