

Sermon for Sunday September 24, 2023

This gospel! One of the most aggravating parables ever! Can't Jesus see how unfair the landowner is?

We're in the midst of several strikes around the country: screenwriters, actors, auto workers. If I don't get my daily dose of the late-night comedians, I'm a little cranky, but if the writers who craft their jokes don't get paid anywhere near the same level as the comedian, who relies on their writers' craft to serve their audience, is that fair? If the stars who are useless without a writers' room get all sorts of residual payments each time some show is aired, even online, and the writers never get residuals, is that fair? I get that. It's the same with the auto workers. When the head of an auto company makes \$29 million in 2022, more than 362 times as much as the person on the assembly line, is that fair? As the daughter of a Teamster shop steward and a schoolteacher, I understand the fight for fairness in compensation and working conditions, so when I hear this Gospel, I'm among the many, including the workers in this parable who say, "That's not fair!"

This landowner is unfair in the eyes of his workers.

Except...the landowner isn't, because this is a parable, and it takes some deeper thinking to get at the point.

Let's take it as a given that the landowner is supposed to represent God. That's the way parables often work. Let's also stipulate that the various workers represent us, we human beings, who come into relationship with God at various stages of our lives. We also step away from God on occasion, and we may not

reestablish that relationship for quite a while. That's the reality of being a humanoid, right?

But God loves us. God wants to be in relationship with us. God forgives us when we turn to him. God always wants to embrace us if we want God to embrace us.

So how about that landowner? Top wage for everybody? Even if I worked ten hours in the blazing sun, and this guy who was just hired on two hours ago to help with the cleanup?

What does it matter, if I'm getting the top wage? It's not a pie with limited number of slices. We all get the whole pie.

And the whole pie is God's love, more boundless and immeasurable than we can imagine. We get all of it. It is rather like that moment in the Oprah show when she was talking about some sort of special thing, and she wraps it up by saying everyone is going to get one. You get it, and you get it, and you get it! Everybody gets it!

We have heard parables a number of times, and we start out understanding what we think the point of the parable is, and then Jesus turns it upside down. And we stop and say "what? I thought I got this, and now I'm not so sure."

Jesus tells these stories to break us out of our conventional way of thinking. Oftentimes he is making a point about how some people are treated unfairly in the economy of his day. But then, in this one, he does something even more remarkable, and difficult for us to understand: he says that we're

focused on the wrong economy. It's not the economy of the world, where complaints about unfair compensation are commonplace and usually true. It's about God's economy, which is based on something different that dividing the pie and others competing for it. It's based on an economy of wild abundance and love, where everyone gets the max if they are in relationship with God.

I hear some of you thinking, "well, what does that do for people who are unfairly compensated or unfairly taxed or unfairly promoted?"

In itself, it doesn't fix that. But what it does do is give a promise of hope, and what it also does is inspire folks to advocate for the sort of generosity and equal treatment that God gives us.

God's generosity is built on a different scale than human, earthly generosity, just as God's forgiveness is similarly scaled. What would the world look like if we fought to make our economy look a little bit more like God's, and a little bit less like the auto executives'? How would it feel to have a world where fairness and generosity of heart is central, rather than worrying about a quarterly shareholder dividend? Don't get me wrong, I like it better when my retirement fund is doing better, but I also know that there are all kinds of people who don't have that safety net. I try to find a way to help, and I probably don't do as much as I should, but I am trying, and perhaps we all should try a little harder as well.

So this week, I urge us all to think about God's economy and human economy, and see how we might lean a little bit more toward the God side and a little less toward the human side.

Amen.