

- Narrator: This is a story Jesus told. It concerns work, justice, equality, economics. 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 marketplace; and he said to them,
- Landowner: You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.
- Narrator: 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,
- Landowner: Why are you standing here idle all day?
- Narrator: They said to him,
- Unemployed 1: Because no one has hired us.
- Unemployed 2: No one has hired us.
- Narrator: He said to them,
- Landowner: You also go into the vineyard.
- Narrator: When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager,
- Landowner: Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.
- Narrator: 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,
- Worker 1: These last worked only one hour,
- Worker 2: and you have made them equal to us
- Worker 3: who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.
- Narrator: But he replied to one of them,
- Landowner: 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?
- Narrator: So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

**-New Revised Standard Version**

This past Thursday I listened to an analysis of recent Supreme Court arguments about the student loan forgiveness enacted last year. And I heard a lot of discussions about fairness. Is it fair that some should have loans forgiven when others paid theirs off? Is it fair that some get loans forgiven when others paid for college outright? Is it fair that student loans should be forgiven when small business loans aren't? Likely none of these questions of fairness are what will settle the matter, but it was striking how many there were. Life is not fair; so my mama told me many, many times. And when we read parables like the one we read today we too find ourselves thinking a lot about fairness. And it seems that human and divine ideas on this matter might be rather different things.

I could be wrong, but I sense that most of the people of St. A's are hard working people who have invested a great deal of themselves into various professional, civic, and cultural pursuits. I know how much you have invested in service of your neighbors through this church. I suspect that most of us more readily identify with the workers who were sent to the fields at the break of day to labor for 12 hours straight than with the workers who got called at 5 p.m. and put in an hour. We can imagine that if we had labored for 12 hours in hot, burning sun, and then waited in a long line for our daily pay, and saw all sorts of workers who had worked far less than us that day dancing away with a full day's wage (and energy to spare), we'd begin to hope that we'd be pleasantly surprised too. If they had something to dance about, we better have something even better to dance about. But when we are paid the same as those who worked only one hour, even though we are paid exactly what we were promised, we become indignant. It is just not fair. The same pay whether you work one hour or twelve? For we 12 hour workers, that is simply unacceptable.

There are some who find this parable exceedingly offensive. Deep down we want some to get more than others; we think some deserve more than others; we resent it when those of lesser effort, skill, integrity get the same or more than us; on some level we want those who we deem lazy, recalcitrant, difficult, or corrupt to get a lesser cut. I once heard of a woman who made sure to miss church any time this text was going to be read— because she didn't like the implication that God's generosity extends even to the latecomers and low workers.

Jesus keeps doing this, in Matthew, doesn't he? He keeps suggesting that God's grace extends even to our enemies. He keeps letting the freedom of a good and generous God foil human ideas of fairness. I was fascinated by this portrayal of a landowner who keeps going back to the marketplace to find more workers— who does this? Who makes five separate trips into town to hire more workers? Clearly he had a lot of work that needed doing in his vineyard. But you get the sense that he just doesn't want to leave anyone out. And if you can imagine what it would be like to wait all day for meaningful, gainful work— to perhaps have been running a little late that morning, or off relieving yourself when the landowner swung back by— a series of missed opportunities. There you are, contemplating going home with empty pockets, with nothing to show for a day away from home, when the landowner appears again and when he learns that you have been idle not because you were unwilling to work, but because no one has hired you, he hires you. Can you imagine how that would feel? Can you imagine the relief? Even if you thought you'd make pennies, you'd make something. The day is not wasted. And then, an hour later, you're the first to be paid and you make a full day's wage? What joy! Truly different emotional experiences at the front and the back of the line, especially because the first are last and the last are first.

Several of us read Miroslav Volf's book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a World Stripped of Grace* several years ago in the season of Lent. In the first chapter, Volf challenges two false images of God to which many of us are rather attached— God the Negotiator and God the Santa Claus.

When we are operating with an image of God as negotiator we try to make deals with God — most of us have done this at one time or another. Volf points to a scene in the movie *Amadeus* where Salieri kneels before a crucifix and tries to make a bargain with God— Make me a great composer, make me famous, make me immortal. And in return he promises chastity, industry, humility and service of fellow humans. Volf suggests that God's answer to Salieri is "I've got something you want, but you've got nothing I need." God gives Mozart, not Salieri, that which Salieri sought. You can't make a deal with a being who is the source of all that you are and have— a being who needs nothing. God doesn't make deals. God gives.

When we are operating with an image of God as Santa Claus, we get that God is generous, but we miss that God also has expectations or desires for us. As Volf puts it, “God is an infinitely rich, always available, and unfailingly generous giver— or at least, that’s what we feel a god worthy of divinity ought to be. God gives without conditions and without demands. As the sun shines and a spring flows, so God gives— solves our problems, fulfills our desires, and makes us feel good. A Santa Claus God demands nothing from us. A divine Santa is the indiscriminately giving and inexhaustibly fertile source of everything that is, and everything that is to come our way” (Volf, 27). When we think of God in this way, we are right that God is inexhaustibly, abundantly, unceasingly generous, but, and I quote again, we “conveniently forget that we were created in God’s image to be in some significant sense like God— not like God in God’s divinity, for we are human and not divine, but like God ‘in true righteousness and holiness’ (Ephesians 4:24), like God in loving enemies (Matt 5:44). To live well as a human being is to live in sync with who God is and how God acts.”

If the landowner represents God— Matthew thought he did, and I don’t have trouble thinking the same— if the landowner represents God, I think our parable today challenges both the ideas of God as negotiator and God as Santa Claus. The landowner has expectations of all the people he calls to his vineyard. He expects their labor. He is generous in giving them the opportunity to work. And he is generous in the compensation he offers at the end of the day. He gives every single worker a living wage— enough for the day. As one commentator put it— he pays by the person, not the hour. This seems to be a very faithful portrayal of the way God works, the true God, the God of Israel who delivered the Israelites from slavery and provided them enough every day to keep them alive on their arduous journey to freedom, the God revealed in Jesus who made time for everyone, who offered gifts to everyone, who made it plain God’s forgiveness is available for everyone-- who lived and died and rose again for everyone. It can be hard for us to grasp, we diligent, earnest, hard working folks, but each of us is absolutely dependent on God each and every day for our very survival. Everything that has breath is dependent on God. And we can depend on God because God is so infinitely generous.

The landowner asks marvelous questions at the end of the parable today. He asks “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am

generous?” The second question, in a literal translation from the Greek, is “Is your eye evil because I am generous?” If we focus our eyes on a comparison with other people, sizing some up as better or worse, more or less deserving than us— this takes us nowhere good; it breeds judgment, resentment, bitterness.... But if instead we can focus our eyes on the surpassing generosity of God— that from which we benefit, that from which others benefit— if we focus on God’s great generosity our eye will not be evil, our hearts will be filled with faith instead of envy, gratitude instead of bitterness. And out of that deep gratitude will flow our own generous responses; we will find ourselves making extraordinary offerings even when there is no basket provided to us.

Sources in addition to scripture that influenced or were cited in this sermon:

Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, I Love to Tell the Story: Working Preacher’s Narrative Lectionary Podcast, “Laborers in the Vineyard,” Episode 354, [http://](http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1115)

[www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1115](http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1115)

Miroslav Volf, Free of Charge, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.