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The Ways of Jesus: Fairness
The Workers in the Vineyard
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You probably know this about me, though I don't know if I've said it before, I embrace religious pluralism. To me this means that I believe in the validity and positive contributions of more than one religion. I know there are things to learn from traditions other than the one I choose for myself. Our neighbors who are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Indigenous, among others, are influenced by their traditions and therefore our community is influenced by those traditions. The Divine reveals itself to people in many ways, even ways that are not considered "religious," and one way is not better or worse than another way. So often Christians get this wrong, trying to scare people into believing what they believe. We are supposed to love people, not scare them.

Over the years, I have enjoyed friendships with people from a variety of traditions and am grateful to have had good conversation partners in them. One of the things I have noticed is that when I talk to them about what Jesus taught, how he loved, and what his vision for the world was, they generally agree the world would be a better place if we all followed the ways of Jesus. Right now, in Germany, the World Council of Churches is meeting. At that gathering, the Secretary General of Religions for Peace International, Professor Azza Karam, spoke and said this, "Christ's love was not only meant for people of the Christian faith. I believe, as a Muslim, that Christ's love was meant for me too." I, too, believe the kind of love Jesus talked about is for everyone, whether they believe what I believe about God or not.

As I was planning this sermon series, I wondered, what would it be like to take what Jesus taught and pluck it out of the context of Christianity? What if we looked at his philosophy through the lens of morality; how we behave and what is right and wrong? I wondered, if we did that, would Jesus' message be a message more people could embrace? I mean...if we believe the ways of Jesus will save the world, why not separate his message from religion, which has been the cause of division and trauma for centuries? Why not talk about what Jesus taught in ways people who are not religious or not Christian might find compelling? So, that's what I hope to do in the series. I hope to talk about Jesus as a moral philosopher

and gifted communicator of truth that was relevant 2000 years ago and right now.

Since tomorrow is Labor Day, a day set aside to honor the contributions and humanity of workers, it's a good time to explore Jesus' parable of The Workers and the Vineyard. It's a familiar parable and one I am especially drawn to because scholars believe that, of all the parables attributed to Jesus, this is one that seems most likely to have been something Jesus would have really said. So, imagine Jesus is here and one of us has just asked him what he thinks the world should be like. This is Matthew 20:1-15:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ 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?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ 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.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² 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.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

Traditional Christianity has typically interpreted this parable allegorically. In the allegory, the vineyard owner is God, the workers are Jews and Gentiles, and the daily wage is eternal life with God. The message is that people who have lived with the knowledge and experience of God since early in life (like the Jews) should

not complain about those who find their way to God later in life (like the Gentiles). Instead, they should celebrate that all receive the same reward in the end: life forever with God. This interpretation is comfortable, isn't it? We don't really have to do anything. God's generosity does all the work.

Here's the thing, though, Jesus was much more interested in what was going on right here on earth than he was about what happens when we die. And my experience with Jesus' stories is that if our interpretation feels too comfortable or easy, it's probably not the right interpretation. If Jesus told this story, it was about real people with real problems and real fears. And as is always the case, it was good news to some people and bad news to others and we should ask ourselves which group would have decided this must be an allegory. Jesus couldn't have really meant what he said, right?

The parable comes along right after the story of the rich young man who went away from Jesus sad, unable to follow Jesus because he had too much to lose. Jesus told his listeners that people who hang on tightly to a lot of stuff have a lot of trouble, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle," he told them. It isn't that Jesus didn't like rich people. It was that people with the most to lose typically had the hardest time following him. So, when Jesus began another story, this time about a wealthy landowner, the author of Matthew's original audience was probably like, "Oh, we know what to expect. The rich guy is going to cheat the workers."

Day laborers then, like day laborers now, were among the poorest of the poor; they were a very vulnerable group. In his book, *The Giveaway God*, Fr. John Bluck describes first century Palestinian day laborers like this, "Day laborers were either peasant farmers who had lost their land through foreclosure on debt or they were the children who missed out on family inheritance. Either way they were desperate and expendable, constantly hungry, malnourished, and diseased."¹ Think about it like this. The money they were paid for a day's work was supposed to be enough to sustain them for one day, yet the work was sporadic and could not be counted on, and many of the workers had families they were trying to support. The next day's wages were never guaranteed. It was a hard, stressful life.

¹ Bluck, John, *The Giveaway God*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001, 22.

At first glance, it seems a great injustice has occurred in Jesus' story. Some of the workers worked all day, while others worked only a fraction of the day, and yet, they were all compensated with a full day's wages. That doesn't seem fair. That was definitely not what the workers expected. And it was not what Matthew's audience expected. The last hired workers didn't expect to be paid a full day's wages. And when the first hired saw what the last hired had been paid, they didn't expect to be paid the same amount, even though that's what they agreed on. I wonder, too, did the vineyard owner expect the grumbling by the first hired group? Did he imagine they would be happy for the others?

The root of the workers' complaint was essentially that the landowner destroyed the order of their world. The Roman empire, not unlike the United States of America, was very much a top down society. In this parable, the workers were caught off guard, no longer sure where they were in the great order of things, "You have made them equal to us," the first workers grumble (v. 12). But really, it occurs to me that's not even true. The landowner has not actually treated them equally. In a society based on treating everyone strictly equally, workers would be paid an equal wage for their work, and the wage would only be equal if it was in proportion to how much work each worker performed. That isn't what happened here though. We can sense an egalitarian thread running through the parable, but upon examination, Jesus doesn't seem to be after strict equality here.

And, truth be told, the workers hired first don't want to be equal, to have the same amount of money as the other. No, they want to have more. When they saw what the last workers received, it was not enough to be paid what they had been promised. They now expected more. That attitude is what earns them disapproval, "Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

I love the Scholars' Translation of verse 14, "Take your wage and get out!" The first workers are so focused on the inequity, they can't even acknowledge the landowner's generosity toward their fellow workers. It was simple, their co-workers had gotten lucky, and they weren't having it.

Let's look at that luck for a moment. Imagine you have a big project that needs to get finished at your house. You've waited and waited for the companies you've called to get back to you, but you cannot delay any longer. The job must be done

now. When you complain to your friend that you need some good workers, you learn that every morning, downtown, day laborers wait for people to come by and offer them a day's work. So, the next day, you get there early. There are a lot of people waiting for work. Your job requires some difficult manual labor. You see 5 muscle bound guys and immediately hire them for the job. That makes sense, right? Well, that's how it works, even today. The big, strong healthy guys get hired first. And then the not so strong healthy guys. And then the guys who are small and a little sickly looking. And then the guys who have a limp. And so on.

Do you see? The workers hired last didn't do anything wrong. They got up early that morning just like the guys that were hired first. But while the big, strong workers were hired and went to work, the ones who weren't as strong, the ones who were injured from yesterday's work, stayed behind, and continued to stand there, waiting, worrying, and hoping they would be chosen. In the parable, when those hired first whine that it is they who have "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (v. 12), they don't get that "in their own way the men hired at five o'clock have been bearing [a burden as well] before they surprisingly get a chance of earning something."² There is a name for this. It is called luck egalitarianism.

Luck egalitarianism was a new idea to me this week. I learned that it is an approach to fairness that strives for equality of opportunity (rather than equality of outcome). It equalizes the effects of luck, on the rationale that distinctions of luck are arbitrary, having no moral import.³ In other words, some people get lucky, and some don't and that is a morally neutral truth. In the case of the parable, this theory would say it is fair that the last workers were paid the same as the first, because they were all trying to work for the day, it is just that the first were lucky enough to be hired earlier. From a work perspective, I think of this in the same way I think of, "It's not what you know, but who you know." I wonder, as we think about our lives, how much of what we have is a result of luck? Being born in the United States, having middle class parents, meeting that one teacher, being in the right place at the right time for that job or that scholarship, going to that party and catching the eye of that person...you see what I mean. We all know people for whom the lyrics from Hee Haw's song "Gloom, Despair, and Agony on

² O'Collins, Gerald, (1999), *Following the Way: Jesus Our Spiritual Director*, Harper Collins, London, 34.

³ Anderson, Elizabeth, [1999], "Against Luck Egalitarianism: What Is the Point of Equality?," from: [Social Justice \(Blackwell Readings In Philosophy\)](#), Clayton, Matthew & Williams, Andrew (eds.), (2004), Blackwell, Oxford, 154-55.

Me,” seem always to apply. The four moonshiners in that recurring skit sang, “If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have not luck at all.” What would the world be like if everyone got lucky? (that sounded different when I wrote it than when I said it)

You may remember, a few years ago, presidential candidate, Andrew Yang, suggested the idea of a basic income benefit for everyone. There was a lot of discussion about the dangers of just handing everyone money and the fear that if people were guaranteed an income, would they even want to work. I listen to a podcast called “The Partially Examined Life.” In the episode titled, “New Work,” the suggestion was made that “A luck egalitarian justification for [a basic income benefit]...is that by guaranteeing everyone a genuine living wage, the negative effects of luck in the employment market are effectively neutralized.

If due to luck, one suffers a financial misfortune then one’s subsistence-level needs will still be met. Someone who must take time off because their child is sick will still be able to feed their family, even if it is macaroni and cheese with tuna. Everyone eats. Nobody starves. What would that world be like?

In the parable, Jesus holds out to the disciples, and us too, a new reality. The good news he offers the ones who rarely receive good news is a vision of an alternative world where everyone receives what is necessary to live, where what has always been expected is reversed. This new vision undermines the old distinctions and competition that preoccupied the disciples and so often preoccupy us. Activist Dorothy Day once commented on this parable saying, “Jesus spoke of the living wage, not equal pay for equal work...”⁴ A living wage for everyone, rather than the competitive struggle and inequality of the workplace. What would a world where the most vulnerable people weren’t competing against each other for the basics be like?

That is what Jesus asks us to imagine. He asks us to silence the critical voices in our minds that say, “People will just choose to be lazy,” and “I got what I got because I worked hard.” He asks us to acknowledge the deep-rooted assumptions that structure our society and keep us from being able to see that things really could be different. Our world doesn’t have to be a mess of dysfunctional, dichotomies: winner and loser, superior and inferior, insider and outsider, honored and shamed. Jesus asks us, if we are the praying kind, to remember to pray for the common good, “Give *us our* day, *our* daily bread.”

⁴ Day, Dorothy, *The Long Loneliness*, New York: Harper and Row, 1992, 205.

What Jesus said was radical then and it is radical today. Our competitive, rat race world is a long way from the world Jesus imagined, the world his followers then and his followers now hope for. If our nation's laborers have taught us anything it's that together we can change the world. And even individually we can make a difference. Here is my invitation to you this week: Be someone's luck. Be the reason someone goes home to their family and says, "Maybe my luck is changing." Dear Ones, we are lucky. We have each other, not because we worked harder than our neighbors or because we are smarter or better, but because we are so very lucky. Be someone's unexpected good luck this week and let's change the world together. Amen.