

## **Overcoming the Wage-Based Lie (A Sermon for Proper 20A)**

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Matthew 20:1-16

September 24, 2017

We all know somebody who never earned nor deserved what they got, right? They didn't really deserve that job, promotion, raise, recognition, happiness, or success. We worked longer or tried harder, but that didn't make any difference.

More often than not, we view the world, ourselves, and others through the lens of fairness rather than grace. We view ourselves in comparison to others.

That's the exact opposite of how God views the world.

We've been taught from an early age that fairness matters. Watch a bunch of children play and it won't be long before you hear someone say, "That's not fair!" But it's not just children. Adults want fairness too.

We like fairness, I think, because it gives us some assurance of order, predictability, control, and hierarchy; even if it is a false assurance. Fairness is based on what you deserve, how hard you work, what you achieve, the way in which you behave.

We live in a wage-based society where you earn what you get. You deserve the consequences of your actions, good or bad.

But what happens when divine goodness trumps human fairness? You get today's parable. Today's parable suggests that fairness and grace, wages and generosity, stand in opposition to each other.

They are two opposing worldviews, and a wage-based worldview allows little room for generosity in our own lives or the lives of others.

Generosity is dangerous. It reverses business as usual. “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” That’s not how a wage-based society works. The world says the last are last and the first are first because they deserve it. It’s what is fair. Our understanding of fairness, however, doesn’t seem to have priority in the kingdom of heaven where generosity is the rule, not the exception.

When we talk about the generosity of God, we’re talking about grace. And God’s generosity, God’s grace, looks beyond our productivity, our appearance, our dress, our race, our gender, our sexuality, our accomplishments, our failures. Grace recognizes there is more to us and who we are than what we have done or left undone.

Wages reveal human effort. Grace reveals the goodness of God.

Wages make distinctions and separate. Grace seeks unity and inclusion.

Wages are based on merit. Grace just happens.

Grace reminds us that we are not nearly as self-sufficient, deserving, or independent as a wage-based society would like us to believe. Neither is our worth determined by our productivity or usefulness to another.

The tragedy of this wage-based lie is that it blinds us to generosity and the presence of grace in our own life. It can make us resentful of the generosity and grace we see in the lives of others. It separates and isolates us from others.

That’s what happened to the folks hired first in today’s parable. They saw themselves as different from and more deserving than those hired later. They grumbled against the landowner saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us.” The truth is,

they are not that different from each other. Neither group owned the vineyard. Both groups needed a job, and both groups were chosen, invited in, by no effort of their own doing.

And the first hired didn't have any issues at all with the wages they agreed to, until they saw what someone else was getting.

It was no longer between them and the landowner. The trouble happened when it became a comparison game. The trouble started when envy and jealousy showed up.

This wage-based lie, here in the Gospel reading and in our own experiences, start with envy and jealousy.

The first murder in the Bible happens because of Cain's jealousy of his brother Abel's sacrifice. Later, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery because they are jealous of his status as their father's favored son.

Jealousy is one of those primal emotions that shows up in our earliest texts and lurks within each of us from an early age. Think back – when was the first time you remember feeling jealous? Someone else had the new Barbie doll. Someone else got picked for the team ahead of you. Someone else had a fruit rollup at lunch and all you had was a lousy vanilla pudding.

I'd venture to say that a good portion of the world's problems have come about because of envy, jealousy, and our preoccupation with what other people have that we don't.

This wage-based lie attacks on a global scale. Poverty, hunger, access to basic medical care and clean water – they all have their roots in a scarcity mentality, the jealous guarding of resources. After all, there is enough food in the world to feed everyone. And yet some have too much and some have none at all.

It attacks on a personal level, as well. Infidelity, covetousness – even bullying – have their roots in our incessant primal need to compare ourselves to others.

The cure for this problem, this jealousy, this “someone else syndrome,” is grace. And when we receive God’s grace and live it out, it turns into generosity.

This wage-based life of envy and jealousy makes us think in zero-sum terms. If someone else has something, that obviously means we *can’t* have it, and so we must feel envious.

But the generosity treatment exposes this lie of zero-sum thinking.

A generous heart rejoices in the good things others have received, and this joy leaves no room for jealousy to strike. Someone else had the new Barbie doll; well, I’m glad to see her so happy. Someone else got picked for the team ahead of you; well, he was having a bad morning and that just made his day. Someone else had a fruit rollup at lunch and all you had was a lousy vanilla pudding...well, I’m not sure what to say about that one.

It seems my generosity treatment is still in the early stages.

But you get the idea. Generosity flips this wage-based lie on its head.

So this week, I invite you to start actively combating the wage-based lie and this jealous desire we’ve all had since childhood. Ask God for the strength to practice generosity, to rejoice at the fortunes of others, to share the joy of their triumphs and then to bear with them the pain of their defeats.

Don’t let the envy, jealousy, and the wage-based lie cut you off from one of the greatest gifts God has given each of us, but which we fail to receive so much of the time.

This grace...this gift...is the joy made manifest by God's love connecting each of us, one to the other. This gift is the capacity to rejoice no matter who is the object of good fortune. This gift is a heart overflowing with generosity.

Can we do this? Can we call out this wage-based lie and start living this grace-filled, generous life?

*Amen.*