

I have a friend named Jerry who owns a business. It is not a large business. But, it is successful enough to support him and his family. Jerry’s business is large enough for him to have several employees. He gets to choose who he hires. He decides how much he pays. Once, one of his employees looked through the files when he was not at work and learned how much her coworkers earned. She was incensed because he paid a particular coworker more than her. She confronted Jerry, demanding a raise in pay. She had no basis for her demand, and when he gave him an ultimatum, “Either pay me more, or I quit,” he said no.

Jesus tells several parables to explain God’s kingdom. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed (13:31) ... yeast (13:33) ... a treasure hidden in a field (13:44) ... a merchant in search of fine pearls (13:45) ... a net thrown into the sea (13:47) ... a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants (18:23) ... a landowner hiring laborers (20:1) ... a king arranging his son’s marriage (22:2) ... a man traveling to a far country (25:14).” Matthew portrays Jesus trying to convey something that is beyond our capacity to understand. What is God’s kingdom like? *Tell me a fact and I’ll learn. Tell me a truth and I’ll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.* Jesus used stories to explain God’s kingdom.

This explanation begins with something familiar, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” His listeners feel right at home. Then, Jesus adds some unfamiliar details. For example, the landowner went. Why? They might ask. “Where is the manager? Why did the landowner go?” But, the landowner did go and entered into a specific agreement with the first laborers. The landowner pays one denarius, which is a subsistence wage—not to imply that the landowner was taking advantage of these laborers. It was probably a fair wage for unskilled laborers, but one denarius would not be enough to support a family. Remember this agreement. It is crucial in the final scene of the parable.¹

The next detail that would have made Jesus’ audience utter, “Wait a minute,” was the landowner’s repeated trips to the marketplace. Matthew does not tell us why no one hired those who were “standing idle” earlier. The landowner hires the first group of workers based on an oral contract for the normal amount, one denarius. Now, the landowner promises the next group what is “right.” This word, *δικαιος*, means equitable (in character or act), and by implication, it means what is holy or righteous. This is the same word in Matthew 1:19 used to describe Joseph, when it says, “Joseph, being a righteous (*δικαιος*) man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” That is the level of the landowner will pay when it says the next group will get what is “right.” The first group has a verbal contract, but these new arrivals can only trust in what master sees as just or right. In fact, both groups depend on the trustworthiness of the landowner.²

Again, the landowner returns to the marketplace and keeps hiring laborers. A poor Nicaraguan peasant named Oscar, who would have more in common with the biblical

laborers than we do, said, "I don't think the boss was unfair, because he didn't care about the work, or the profits it would bring. What he wanted was for everybody to be working."³ So, here we have this landowner going back to the market. Maybe he was just running some errands. I am retrojecting my twenty-first-century sense of purpose for being back in the market. But, it does not matter why the landowner went. This character is the owner of the vineyard and gets to decide whether or not to hire more workers. I like Oscar's interpretation. The landowner saw people idle, and the reason did not matter. The landowner thought, 'I can put them to work,' and hired them.

Another Nicaraguan who also has more in common with the laborers than we do, Felipe, said, "Here [Jesus is] saying that the kingdom of heaven is like a great farm, but a farm on which everybody earns the same so nobody will feel he's more than anybody else; people aren't separated by wages."⁴ Felipe might not articulate it this way, but his interpretation invokes *imago Dei*, this notion that humanity is made in God's image, best summarized by Genesis 1:26-27, "Let us make humanity in our image... So God created humanity in [God's] image." Or, this could bring to mind the equity in Paul's theology, evidenced in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek... slave or free... male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

In the evening, the landowner called the laborers together. Again, can this guy not delegate? If this were about management science, it might about the pitfalls of micro-managing. But, it isn't. It is about the kingdom of God. God's equity is different than ours. God wants a relationship with everyone. God wants each person to be part of the kingdom. The landowner paid the last hired first. The landowner paid them a denarius. It was not a radical act of generosity. It is a subsistence wage. So, the people could afford to eat that day. Then, the landowner paid each person a *δικαιος*, or righteous amount. The ones who worked all day thought the pay scale was unfair.

Have you ever had someone do something against you? You want justice. That is natural. You want what is fair. I understand. The problem is God plays by a different set of rules. We want restitution but God offers transformation. We want what we are due. But, God reminds us that we are all sinners in need of grace and are due nothing. The landowner reminds those who worked all day, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Maybe this passage is about God's free gift of salvation. Maybe it is about God's acceptance of people regardless of when in their lives, they turn to God. Or, maybe this story is about God's desire for humanity to work together. One commentator suggested that this story describes the responsibility rich people have toward poor people.⁵ Either way, God's love is radical, and God does not play by our rules.

Do you remember my friend Jerry who owns a small business? He employs a young man who struggles with addiction. The stories of the young man's escapades are many and sordid. Some of the other employees wonder why he puts up with it. They wonder why he does not fire the young man after each misadventure. He does no wrong to the other employees. He upholds his agreement with them. Is he not allowed to do what he chooses with what belongs to him?

We should not be jealous when other people experience God's love, even if we have known God longer and feel like we deserve a bigger portion. We do not. God's love is bigger than we are. God's love is transcendent. No matter where we are on our journey, we can cry out to God and know that our Lord hears our cry.

¹ Lewis R. Donelson, "Matthew 20:1-16," in *Feasting on the Word*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 93.

² M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 393.

³ Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname, Volume 3*, trans. Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 180.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵ John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 165.