

Matthew 20:1-16

"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, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 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, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

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.' 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, '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.' But he replied to one of them, '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?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

When I was a little kid in upstate New York, the school that I went to had an indoor swimming pool, which is fabulous luxury to have in a school except for the poor teachers whose job it was to shepherd a bunch of second-graders to and from the pool and therefore to and from the showers after the pool so that you can go on with your day in a reasonable amount of time. My second-grade teacher, Mr. C, was a clever man with a solid command of second-graders. And so after swimming, Mr. C would station himself in the hallway just outside the bathrooms, where both the boys and the girls would emerge and line up to go back to class. And he would stand there with one twenty-five cent bagel, which is a high delicacy in upstate New York. And to the first girl and the first boy who emerged dressed and ready to go, he would give a nice big chunk of bagel. And to the second girl and the second boy who emerged, he would give a respectable chunk of bagel — not quite as big as the first, but substantial. And to the third, somewhat less. And so on, and so on. And if you were somewhere outside of the top five or so . . . well, everybody would get something. But mostly, towards the end, it was crumbs.

Now, in retrospect, I see this from Mr. C's perspective, where, for the meager investment of a quarter a couple of times a week — for which I am sure he was not being reimbursed, but clearly it was worth it— for just twenty-five cents he procured the peace of mind of not having to round up a few dozen dripping-wet eight-year olds; they just magically appeared in front of him as quickly as they possibly could. At the time, of course, what the exercise bred in us was a ruthless efficiency. We would tear out of the water. We would race through the bathroom. We would dry off and towel off and change as quickly as circumstances possibly allowed, quickly enough that I have strong doubts about how clean or how dry we could possibly have been. But we learned, very very quickly that the biggest reward came to those who worked the hardest. And that the

biggest share went to those who worked the fastest. And that we'd run over one another in the process, if we had to. All for the best possible piece of a twenty-five cent bagel. But we learned the lesson: Fair is fair.

Fair is fair. The disciples get it. They recognize the arrangement of this parable immediately. A landowner goes out in the morning to hire workers to work in his field. The disciples are fishermen and laborers in their own right; they speak this language intimately; everybody knows the deal. The landowner and the laborers agree on a daily wage, you know, one good chunk of bagel per person. The laborers get to work. But then something unexpected happens. All throughout the day, the landowner keeps bringing on new laborers, and keeps making the same deal with each of them. And then at the end of the day, everybody gets the same bagel. The folks that were there at the crack of dawn, one chunk of bagel. The folks that came at lunch, one chunk of bagel. The folks that showed up just after happy hour, one chunk of bagel. And so our friends who have been there all day begin to lose their temper. "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!" Why should they get this same as those of us who were here first? What happened to fair is fair?

I am trying to imagine what it would have been like if this parable had played out in a hallway full of second-graders waiting outside the swimming pool. I was never first. I was always somewhere solidly in the middle. But I am trying to imagine what it would have been like, on that glorious day when I could have found myself at the very front of the queue. Except that this day would be different. On this day, I would have gotten my promised share of the bagel, my usual daily wage, and then Mr. C would have gone down the line and given just as large a share to the person next to me, and just as large a share to the person next to him, and so on and so forth. I am trying to imagine what that would have felt like. And I know that I would have hated it. Because the whole point was the winning of the thing, and fair is fair. And I was there first. And I know how the rules are supposed to work. How dare Mr. C show up with extra bagels on the day that I happen to be the fastest. And I can also hear him say: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" You got me. Yes. Yes I am.

Of course that hypothetical never would have happened in the hallway of second-graders outside the swimming pool. Mr. C was a fabulous teacher, but he had no interest in teaching anything but one particular lesson with that bagel. He had no interest in slowing down the process or bringing enough for everybody. And we never asked any questions. We didn't ever wonder why just one bagel for twenty-plus kids. We didn't ever wonder whether getting through the bathroom fastest was really the highest and best virtue. We never asked any questions about the system as a whole. When the landowner goes out in late afternoon and finds laborers still standing around without a job he asks them, "Why are you just standing around?" and they say, "No one has hired us." This is a critical turn. They have been looking for work. They have been searching for work. They have put in their fair share of labor already that day and nobody has hired them. Something has gone wrong in the economy of this parable, which means fair is already unfair. The playing field is already tilted. The deck is already stacked. Fair isn't fair, long before we get to the daily wage. And so what the landowner does isn't just about fair. It's beyond fair . . . it's about seeing the needs of the many, and it's about nurturing the health of the whole community. It's about calling all these people into just one kingdom.

Of course, Mr. C was not God. He did not know he was in a sermon illustration, and it was not his responsibility to carry around an infinite supply of bagels in some sort of weird object lesson. But we could still ask systemic questions. Why did it take some kids longer to get through the bathroom than others? Why would some of those kids have needed that extra time? What if there really were kids in that line who were hungry? What if I got out of the pool first with my two strong arms and then ran through the bathroom on my two strong legs and flung myself down in the front of that line to get the biggest and best piece of the bagel and then I found out that somewhere behind me was someone who hadn't woken up to breakfast that day? And now I'm sitting here with this well-earned snack. Fair is fair. Except it's not fair. It was never fair. There's not a fair world where some second-graders wake up to breakfast and others don't. And not for nothing but it's harder to move fast on strong legs and strong arms if you can't start with a good breakfast. So what can we do that's beyond fair? What can we do that sees the needs of the many? What can we do that nurtures the health of the whole? What can we do now that we have been called into one kingdom?

For sure part of that answer involves not holding onto that one big chunk of bagel all by ourselves. Which of course is why I am standing here in the Great Hall at UPC, which for the last six months has been transformed into a huge staging ground for the Micah 6 Food Pantry. The supplies that used to be crammed into a few small basement storage rooms have now overcome almost the entire downstairs — because of course we are not able to use the building for much else, and because we want Micah 6 volunteers to have as much room as possible to maintain social distancing, and so now the Great Hall is full upon full with pinto beans and tuna fish and canned peaches. And of course the whole point of what we do here — and the whole point of what UPLift has done in this same space — and the whole point of you driving through this afternoon and dropping off as much food as you can for this operation and these clients — the whole point of all of our feeding, and all of our service ministries, and all of our advocacy ministries . . . the whole point is to help build something beyond fair. To feed people not based on how fast they made it through the showers or how quickly they got in line, but rather to feed people in anticipation of the kingdom that we want to see. The kingdom that we want to be.

The further truth is that the ministries of UPC don't just need canned goods. They also need financial support, and this year as much as ever. This past week we kicked off our annual Stewardship drive, and I join the leadership of this church in asking for your pledge of financial support, even and especially in this incredibly uncertain time. There certainly are a lot of reasons why we give, and why I ask you to give. Sometimes we talk about what your giving allows us to do — we could talk about how much it costs for us to be part of Micah 6, or operate UPLift, or do the other feeding ministries of this church, or how much it costs for us to host the kind of worship and Christian Formation and fellowship opportunities that we've all come to appreciate, or how much it's going to cost to continue the adaptation and the imagination that has brought us through the pandemic so far. Or sometimes we talk about stewardship in terms of God's gifts to us, and our gifts in return: that God has given us so much, that each of us sits in some part of God's abundance, and isn't it right that we should give back, that each of us do our part, wouldn't that be fair?

But this morning I want to go beyond fair just for a moment. Because, as we all know, this pandemic has brought with it drastically unfair economic consequences. For some of us,

pandemic has meant inconvenience, and adaptation, and probably a little bit of claustrophobia as you continue to be stuck in your homes. For others, it has meant loss of income, and loss of housing, and total personal upheaval. Which means that one way that we can think about stewardship this year is as an act of care for one another. If you are in that first group. If you have come through this comfortably. If you are not reeling from the effects of a shutdown economy. One thing you can do this year is to offer a bit more to this place, in recognition of those for whom offering anything at all is going to be difficult if not impossible. You can make a pledge not just based on what the church means to you, but also based on what it means to the folks worshiping alongside you who may not this year be able to give. You can bear one another's burdens. You can see the needs of the many. You can nurture the health of the whole. You know sometimes stewardship feels like everybody paying their fair share. But it's not about fair, and certainly not this year. It's about: what do we do, now that we have been called into one kingdom? And can you, in this one small way, can you help give in anticipation of the kingdom that we want to see?

After all, there is a kingdom beyond fair. A kingdom that runs on abundance. A kingdom with wages enough for everyone, and time enough for everyone, and fields enough for everyone, a kingdom that overflows with milk and honey and kidney beans and tuna fish and canned peaches and bagels enough for the whole class. There is a world where Mr. C walks down that line and hands out pieces in equal measure, to each child their fair share, the message unequivocally clear: that it does not matter how fast you are, or how strong you are, or how big you are, or how clever you are, or how lucky you are, or how rich you are, or how early you got up that morning, or what you had for breakfast. What matters is that you are here, at this table, gathered around this story, gathered around this work, as part of this family, for the work of this kingdom, and we are so glad you are here. We may not see that kingdom today. But you can get a peek at it. All you have to do is take whatever bread is in your hands. And break it. And then find someone at the back to share it with. And when you do it, you can say: this God's table. Not yours. Not mine. Come, let's share, at a table of grace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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