

I. Advanced organizer -

- A. **Does anyone here have sibling?** How did that go growing up? Most of us, if we're honest will acknowledge that we're grateful as adults for our siblings, but that there were times when we were kids, when **our sibling relationships had at least a little bit of strife**. Maybe they still do. Why? **Sibling rivalry is a real thing**. Anyone who's parented more than one kids knows this. (One of the most stressful parts of parenting.)
1. **Just this week, our family was in Rockridge, having dinner**. Walked by Pegasus Books. Our oldest, Elliott wants to go in and see what they have. And he finds a book he wants to buy, and he has allowance money he can spend on it, so we allow him to buy the book. Then Junia, middle child, sees this and wants something. She also earns allowance so decides to spend her money on a book that looks good to her. Now Gwen doesn't read, she likes looking at books, but she had no thought of books or wanting to get one before we went in the store and Elliott and Junia both bought one. But Gwen doesn't earn an allowance yet. So we said no, and it did not go well. Many tears as we left the store.
 2. **It turns out small children are not the only creatures that feel this way**. Check out this video of a similar experience in monkeys.
 3. **Capuchin monkeys; Show video**.
- B. So monkeys and children both have a hard time when they experience what they perceive as unfairness, don't they? And they're not alone. This is something we all struggle with.
- C. **I'm starting out talking about fairness and unfairness today, because it was something that came up in Jesus' time too**.
- D. We began last week, with Liz preaching, **a new series on Parables, called "Jesus the Storyteller"**. These are what my former NT seminary professor Klyne Snodgrass called "Stories with intent". Stories that provoke. Often they are head scratchers, but they also communicate truths in powerful unexpected ways.
- E. Looking today at a story in Matthew's account of Jesus' life, that Jesus told his followers when they were asking question about fairness and unfairness; levels of reward
- F. **The context was that they had just been talking about money and financial sacrifice**, after a particularly wealthy young man asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus encouraged him to sell his possessions, give them to the poor and follow him, and he couldn't do it. Went away dejected. And then Jesus' closest followers said, **"Well, we've left behind our whole lives...given up everything to follow you. So what will we get?"** And Jesus assures them they're gonna be taken care of. But he qualifies it with this line "But many of the first will be last and the last will be first." And then he launches into a story, which is where we'll pick things up.

II. Story - 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. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, 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 the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also

received the usual daily wage. 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 the usual daily wage? 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?' 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

A. This is a hard story. Why? **It offends our sense of fairness.**

1. It can provoke the monkey or the sibling in us: **how come he gets paid the same for less work?** No fair!

B. Before we get into interpreting, **let's sort out some of what's going on.**

1. **The setting is amongst day laborer's in the ancient world.**

- a) These are people who had a hard lot in life.
- b) **Powerless to secure stable work.** In some ways, worse off than the era's slaves because at least they were provided for; bodies protected. These day laborers had no guarantee they'd get enough on any given day to meet their needs or the needs of their family.
- c) **Day laborers often hung out in the market place waiting for someone to come hire them.** Hope they can get work to make a **denarius** - one day's wages for subsistence living; nothing extra. Bare minimum was adult could live on 1/2 a denarius a day. If you're trying to feed spouse and kids; it's gonna have to stretch.
- d) Day laborers worked long day to get that denarius - sun up to sun down. Something like 12 hours
- e) **Not a cushy work experience.** Hard work in hot Palestinian sun.

2. **This is the setting for Jesus' parable, a realistic setting.** In this fictional tale, a landowner goes to the market place at dawn, gets some workers, they agree to work for a denarius, and they get to work. And a few hours later he goes back and hires more, and continues to do this throughout the day, hiring more and more. The last group he hires at 5 pm, an hour before quitting time. and then around 6 he goes to pay them, starting with the last. They get the denarius. And so the others who've been working all day start to assume they're gonna get paid more, but then when they all get paid the same thing, they're mad, right? It doesn't seem fair. Which brings us essentially to the heart of what this story seems to be communicating: **the master in this story has a unique way of dealing financially, which points us to how God's kingdom is meant to function.** In other words:

C. **God's divine economy functions differently than our human economies.**

1. There's a sense that **God's economy is surprising to humans.** It turns things upside down. The whole story is framed at the beginning and the end by this statement that the "last will be first and the first will be last". That there is reversal happening between the way human economy functions and God's economy functions. So what might that reversal be about? How might these two economies function differently?
2. **Human economies are based on perceptions of fairness and entitlement.**
 - a) people should all be compensated in proportion to how much they work
 - b) if you're gonna give someone a denarius for working an hour, than you should give someone else twelve denarii for working twelve hours! (Human economy)
 - c) **There are problems with human economies and the concept of fairness within them.**
 - (1) **fairness in the valuation of work.** Big issue in the Bay Area now. Why is it that work in tech pays so much more than work in education? Is it "fair" that a software

developer is paid so much more for the work they do than those with extensive education in other fields? Clearly, it's not because the work they do is objectively more important or more difficult. It's because it's simply more lucrative. There's money to be made in tech right now, and so if you're engineer, there's lots of money that can be earned. Supply and demand.

(2) "fairness" assumes equal opportunity, which clearly is not the case in human economies.

(a) race, gender, level of education, being raised in a one parent or two parent home, languages spoken all of these can impact opportunities one has or doesn't have.

- i) **one of our presidential candidates** - started with multi-million dollar loan from parents. That's a meaningful boost. Doesn't mean he's wrong to take advantage of them, but it highlights the reality that not everyone has the same advantages or opportunities and opportunity matters.
- ii) **Fidel Antonio** is a local man with a very different story. He's a Mexican American immigrant, who moved to the US to try to earn money to support his family in Mexico. Two years ago, his story was told by the East Bay Express. Fidel Antonio is undocumented, and so he pursues work as a day laborer, coming daily to Berkeley to stand at a pick-up point on Hearst Avenue, in hopes of finding work. I'm gonna read a little bit of his experience for you,

"I live in Oakland, but I look for work in Berkeley because it pays better. There are day labor places in the Fruitvale and in Alameda, but the contractors there just offer \$8 or \$10 an hour, and the work is often pretty heavy. Some expect you to work as hard as your body will do it, and even say something if you stop to get a drink of water. In Berkeley, they offer \$15 or even \$20 an hour, and the work is often easier, so a lot of day laborers who live in Oakland look for work in Berkeley.

In New York they'd pay you for the day, even if you only worked a few hours. Here they pay by the hour. I'd like to get \$150 for a day, but often someone stops and they only want me for two or three hours. Some contractors pay \$15 to \$20 an hour, and better if they see you're really interested in doing the job right. The trouble is that the job is often only two or three hours.

Right now I can only get two or three days of work a week. Last month I worked five hours on Tuesday, and the contractor paid me \$75. On Wednesday, I worked six hours, but he didn't pay me the \$90. He paid for Tuesday, but not for Wednesday. He told me to wait until the following day, but on Thursday I was sick. I called him, but he got upset, and then refused to pay the six hours he owed.....

There are a lot of bad people here. They say they'll pay \$15 an hour, but when the time comes they only give you \$10. Sometimes they don't pay you at all. They give you a little bit and say they'll pay the rest the next week, and then they give you nothing. If you call the phone number they give you no one answers the phone. This is a really big problem. People don't complain about it, because they're afraid. The contractor has a license, and an advantage over someone with no papers who doesn't speak English. When you're

working they say they like you, but when payday comes they say, "there's the highway."

In the course of a month I make \$800 or \$1000. I'm still sending \$300 to \$400 a month to my sister in Mexico, who's taking care of my mother, and to my children, because they're still young and can't fend for themselves. Then I pay \$250 a month for my rent here, and put in money for electricity and gas. I have to pay for transportation, which is about \$5 or \$6 a day for the bus. And then I have to pay for the food I eat. The reality is that what I'm making doesn't cover all of this."

- iii) Now I know the issue of immigration is complicated, but whatever you feel about it, you have to acknowledge that as these examples show us, our opportunities for what's available to us in order to feed ourselves, to provide for our families, and beyond are not equal across the board.

(b) **The issue of opportunity difference shows up in Jesus' story.** When the master goes to the market at 5 pm and finds people who haven't worked all day, we see the first dialogue exchanged in the story.

- i) **'Why are you standing here idle all day?'** the landowner asks.
- ii) What do they say? **"Because no one has hired us"**. Not because we wanted to bum around and drink wine. Not because we wanted to sleep in. These guys have been sitting here persistently for eleven hours potentially waiting for someone to give them work. **They've been waiting and waiting for an opportunity** to do real work so they could get the bare minimum amount of food that day to feed themselves, their spouses, their kids. It's not about laziness. It's not about mooching. It's about lack of opportunity.
- iii) **This leads us to the landowner's response** and what it communicates. While human economies are based on perceptions of fairness and entitlement:

3. **God's economy is based on mercy, grace, and generosity.**

- a) **The Employer wants to take care of his workers.** He doesn't want any of them to starve. He wants them to have full bellies, and food to feed their kids, whether they gave him an hour of their time or a day.
- b) It's like Jesus is saying **God recognizes the limits of human fairness.** His ways are high above our ways. **God's able to deal with complexities that we can't. His economy makes room for the reality that all work is not weighted equally. It makes room for the reality that not all workers have the same opportunity to work.** It honors each worker where they're at and says no matter your lot in life, if you are a part of what we're doing here, you get paid. You're gonna get taken care of. You're not gonna starve. We got you.
- c) Obviously, when we're talking about God's economy, we're talking beyond day laborers and denarii. **We're talking about the life of faith. There's no ranking in God's economy.** No status. Whether you're a pastor like me who went to seminary, whether you've been faithfully going to church and tithing your whole life, or whether you're struggling to figure out if you can make your way to some kind of faith at all - it doesn't matter. There's no super big crown for me, little, little crown for you. **If you want a place in this field, if you want to be a part in any way of God's work of renewing the world; you are in. You are in and you're gonna be taken care of. And the pay is the same.**

- d) But for those who are trying to understand God's economy with a human economic framework, it breaks down. **Perceptions of fairness and entitlement get in the way of receiving with joy and celebrating others' receiving with joy.**
- e) **God hasn't diminished the gift of provision to those he initially hired.** They've been paid exactly what they were promised for the work they promised to do. It's similar to the monkeys: there would be no issue if they had just all been eating cucumbers, unaware that anyone else was getting a grape. But as soon as these workers sense that someone is getting a better deal than what they think they got, they're mad. They feel the monkey feeling. **They've got envy.**

(1) verse 15 calls this out. Our translation says "Are you envious because I am generous?"

- 4. **What exactly is envy?** Is it the same as jealousy? While these words get confused or conflated fairly often, psychologists point out that they are two distinct emotions. Dr. Richard Smith defines them this way in *Psychology Today*. ***"Envy occurs when we lack a desired attribute enjoyed by another. Jealousy occurs when something we already possess (usually a special relationship) is threatened by a third person...Envy is a reaction to lacking something. Jealousy is a reaction to the threat of losing something (usually someone)."***
- 5. **Envy is what we saw in the monkeys.** It's also at the heart of sibling rivalry. Kids care if their sibling has something that they don't. Psychologists point out that the emotion of envy typically applies most strongly to those who are seen as peers and **the closer we see their peer-ness to us, the more like us they seem to be, the more heightened envy we can have. (Show chart.)** If your friend who is at your level gets something you don't have, a raise, a better car, a cute boyfriend, it's more painful than if somebody that you perceive to be further along in life or at some other level is.
- 6. **Jesus' closest followers were not immune for feelings of envy.** They played the ranking game amongst themselves regularly. And this, I believe is what the parable is intended to speak into. Jesus is making the point that:

D. In order to experience and appreciate God's surprising mercy, we must let go of envy and comparison.

- 1. Jesus is telling this parable right after his followers have been talking about what are they gonna get because they've been in on the ground floor of this kingdom of God thing. **In start-up culture, you work long hours for low pay, but you get paid in equity.** If the company blows up big, their stock is super valuable. So what's the equity for these series-A workers of Jesus? Are they gonna have the biggest throne's in heaven alongside Jesus? Jesus' answer: **The pay is the same. I got you. But I got others too. And the pay is the same.**
- 2. **And this theme continues.** It's like Matthew knows these things are all connected and so he allows these stories to build on one another. A few verses after this parable, **the mother of two of Jesus' closest followers, brothers James and John, approaches Jesus.** And she asks that he'll promise them the seats of most power in her kingdom. Let them sit on your right and left. Let them have top status. Let them be the best of the best. And Jesus won't come out and agree. He says that's up to the Father, basically. And again we get this sense that God's ways are above our own. **God has his own economy: an economy that is just way beyond our human understandings of fairness.** An economy that is merciful. That is gracious. That provides all we need. And yet, if we interpret through our frameworks of human fairness, or entitlement, of envy, of ranking and status, we will miss participating in and celebrating the goodness of our God and his economy.

3. Klyne Snodgrass described the point parable is driving this way, “...just as no one should begrudge a good man who goes beyond justice and gives to the poor, so no one should begrudge God’s goodness and mercy as if God’s rewards were limited to strict calculation.”

Who are we to begrudge God’s goodness and mercy?

III. A couple ideas on how we navigate the call to live into God’s kingdom economy, even as we’re a part of human economies, too. (or “Tips for living with two economies”)

- A. This isn’t just about “pie in the sky when you die”. While this parable may have some implications for how everything ends, **Jesus is clearly speaking to people who are very much participating in this life and it’s necessary economic realities.** So what might he have been hoping his words to his followers might inspire in them? In us?

1. Engage in regular practices that cultivate gratitude.

- a) The problem with the workers who worked the longest is that they **were too busy comparing** what they got to what others got, that they could not joyfully receive the provision they’d been given. How many of us struggle with the same issue?
- b) **Practicing thanksgiving is a simple thing and yet it’s something we often need to be reminded to do.** To take time to say “thank you” to God for the provision we experience. We get busy and we take things for granted.
- c) consider the **various ways** God’s provision is experienced.
 - (1) beyond financial, though it can include that.
 - (2) Relational
 - (3) connection to meaning and purpose
 - (4) connection to living God brings hope, perspective, supernatural power
- d) Thanksgiving could come in a number of forms:
 - (1) Journaling,
 - (2) naming the positive pieces of your day over dinner.
 - (3) Perhaps consider incorporating this into your weekly practice at Haven during responsive worship.
 - (4) as a direct response to envy; when you feel your envy triggered, take a moment to thank God for your job, your spouse, your home, etc.

2. Look for practical ways to participate in God’s economy of mercy and generosity.

- a) In the story, the landowner had a manager who got to dispense the wages at the end of the day. He got to participate in God’s merciful economy. The same invitation is available to us.
- b) Consider practical ways you could be a dispenser of mercy and generosity.
- c) Serving at the shelter
- d) Showing up early to set up bagels or sound equipment or help with kids
- e) generous financial giving; a year ago this church wasn’t meeting here. Two years ago it barely existed at all. All that is happening is because people in our community, and beyond have given out of the financial blessings they’ve received. They’ve participated in God’s generous economy so others could experience God in this place.
- f) Sitting with someone in grief. Praying with them.
- g) **Often what you find is the experience of participating in God’s work of provision for others incalculably enriches your own sense of God’s provision.**
 - (1) my recent “if it was only for this” moments
 - (a) praying with folks who’ve been cast out of church or ministry
 - (b) grieving with the hurting
 - (c) praying for the sick