

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. If you've had the good fortune of meeting my sister, Mandy, or have heard me talk about her before, you probably already know she's one of my favorite human beings on the planet and I count myself extremely blessed to call her my sister. But that doesn't mean that things were always easy between us. Growing up together, our relationship, like many siblings, was complicated.
1. I think of the incident that took place on my 7th Birthday: that was the year I was thrilled to be given a 1st generation cabbage patch doll. They were quite the treasure and there was no gift that would quite make the punch as the gift of one of those dolls. It felt like such a big deal to open that present from my parents on my big day.
 2. However my elation of receiving this ultimate treasure was significantly lessened when my parents brought out another box, similar looking to mine, and presented it to my three year old sister. To be clear: it was NOT her birthday, but we were in the midst of an old school road trip summer vacation, a vacation in which while we traveled across the country in the back of a van, and my sister had the chicken pox. My parents announced that for her suffering, she also deserved a gift. She also deserved a Cabbage Patch Doll.
 3. As I've become a parent myself, this logic does now makes some sense to me. My parents were likely trying to minimize the rivalry between us by recognizing that a toy of this much value would cause extreme envy in our home, so they looked for an excuse to get one for each of us, and my sister's untimely chicken pox in the middle of the family vacation seemed as good a cause as any.
 4. But to me, **this was a profound injustice**. It was my birthday. My sister had had hers a few months before, and I hadn't gotten any presents then. In fact, I didn't get a fancy doll when I had the chicken pox either. **This was unfair**. Why should I have to share the thrill of my special day and it's most special gift with my annoying, snotty faced, diaper wearing, chicken pox-picking sister. It was bad enough that I had to suffer the tragedy of a summer birthday that nearly always took place in the middle of a family vacation or at a time when all my friends were away on their own summer trips, but this indignity was too much.
 5. **I resented my sister and parents for a long time for that event, much longer than I am proud to say as an adult**. And that memory lingers like 35 years later I think profoundly because it as the first memory I really have of deep sibling rivalry. Its the first deep memory I have of feeling that knot in my stomach of anger and envy and competitive energy. And that sadly would characterize my experience on and off with my sister for years in our childhood. I found myself experiencing both the greatest love and affection for her, but that could easily turn on a dime to a sense of betrayal, frustration, or seething jealousy. Perhaps some of you who grew up with siblings, or are parenting multiple kids yourself know what I mean.
- B. Today is our next teaching in our series *A Story-Shaped Faith*, where we're looking at parables of Jesus and considering the ways they were meant to provoke Jesus' listeners and shape the spirituality of those he spoke to, as well as how they might still provoke our own.
- C. As it so happens, this is also the first Sunday in the season of Lent, the roughly six week period that much of the Christian church has used to mark the roughly 40 days leading up to Easter through a time of meditation on the life of Jesus, as well as unique spiritual practices that might rekindle our connection to the Divine.

1. Some folks choose to take on some sort of practice of deprivation during Lent: a fast from a certain food or drink or social media habit that might help them lean more clearly on the Divine for their support rather than those things.
 2. Others choose to take on new spiritual practices such as regular prayer, Bible-reading, or other things. Throughout this season, here at Haven we're going to be inviting you each week to consider trying some practices that we can all engage alongside one another, if we so choose.
 3. This Lent we're connecting these practices to some of the stories that Jesus told; stories that were meant not just to communicate some theological truth but to provoke meaningful action in the lives of the people who heard them: as one scholar has called them, *Stories With Intent*.
 4. Discerning the intent can be a challenge, but this work of discernment is also what makes these stories interesting and useful in shaping our spirituality. As we wrestle together, recognizing that these stories open themselves up to different interpretations, to revealing different challenges to different ones of us or in different seasons of our lives, we can experience the fresh impact of Jesus words in meaningful ways. We can experience our faith being shaped by story.
- II. So today we're looking at another of these parables, one that I hope will be helpful for us to consider as we begin our Lenten Journey together. So let's turn to our parable for today. We find it in only one of the gospels: the book of Matthew. We pick it up at the beginning of chapter 20.

A. *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 And after agreeing with the workers for the standard wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When it was about nine o'clock in the morning, he went out again and saw others standing around in the marketplace without work. 4 He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too, and I will give you whatever is right.' 5 So they went. When he went out again about noon and three o'clock that afternoon, he did the same thing. 6 And about five o'clock that afternoon he went out and found others standing around, and said to them, 'Why are you standing here all day without work?' 7 They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go and work in the vineyard too.' 8 When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages starting with the last hired until the first.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each received a full day's pay. 10 And when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each one also received the standard wage. 11 When they received it, they began to complain against the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last fellows worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who bore the hardship and burning heat of the day.' 13 And the landowner replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am not treating you unfairly. Didn't you agree with me to work for the standard wage? 14 Take what is yours and go. I want to give to this last man the same as I gave to you. 15 Am I not permitted to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'"*

B. So this is a story, commonly known as "The Workers In the Vineyard" that's meant to surprise and provoke; but how?

1. Let's start by considering some of the fundamentals of the story. There's a person who owns property who's hiring day laborers to work in his vineyard. This translation we're looking at calls him a "landowner" but the Greek word used here is actually *oikodespote*, which literally means "master of a house". It's a word we see multiple places in the New

Testament used to describe a head of household. This guy is the head of his estate, and yes in this case, that estate includes a vineyard. So the master of the house goes into town early in the morning, the standard time would have been about 6 am, to find folks to work in the fields for him that day. He finds folks, offers them work in exchange for what the Greek says was one denarius. Our translation says, “the standard wage” which essentially is what a denarius was in the ancient world. It wasn’t a lot of money, but it would feed you and your family modestly for a couple of days. For day laborers in Jesus’ time, this denarius was essential.

- a) Though the story starts innocuously enough with people being hired at the expected time and place and rate, even here at the jump Jesus’ listeners would probably have been at least a bit surprised. Jesus’ audience would likely have been puzzled to hear that the landowner goes himself into town to find laborers to hire rather than sending his manager to do that task, which was generally the custom. With this small detail Jesus seemed to be communicating that **this landowner was not your average boss. There was something a bit different about him.**
2. So the landowner hires his workers at 6 am, and they go into the fields and begin to harvest. But a few hours later, at 9 o’clock, the boss is in town again, sees more people without work and invites them to come into his field, too. And then at noon and at 3 the scene repeats. This is now becoming really strange. When the day is more than half over, why is he still hiring?
 - a) It’s doubtful that the landowner simply underestimated how much labor he needed. Jesus doesn’t say that he hired folks and then realized he had more work than they could do. Jesus also doesn’t say there was anything wrong with the work these people were doing that necessitated more help. It wasn’t the case that he hired some folks and then realized that they were particularly slow or unproductive. **No, the problem the master seems to be responding to doesn’t seem to be so much about how much labor need he has, as much as how many people he encounters who are in need of labor.**
 - b) This point becomes especially clear when he goes back at 5 o’clock, near the end of the work day, and still finds people to hire. “Why are you standing here all day without work?”, he asks them. “Because no one hired us” they tell him. These are folks willing to work, wanting to find ways to meet their needs, but for whatever reason, they have not had the opportunity. **So even though the day is almost over, this different kind of landowner gives them the opportunity.**
3. And then we get to the end of the day, time for payment, where the most surprising turn takes place. The master calls over his steward, as well as all the day laborers, and instructs this manager to hand out the payment, starting with those who were hired last. Now we didn’t hear the amount that the landowner intended to give each of these folks in the story, all we know is that he promises to pay them “whatever is right”. The only defined fee agreement Jesus tells us about is the one at the beginning: work a full day, get a denarius, a standard day’s wage. But here the 5 o’clockers step up to the steward, and he hands them a denarius. And then the three o’clockers get the same. Same with the laborers who have been there since noon. And the ones who came at nine. Then finally our six am hires approach the manager and they too are handed a denarius. Yet though this is what they agreed to work for, though they had been laboring all day expect this fee, when they’re given it, the first-hired workers are not pleased. Why?
4. When these workers were hired, they felt they understood what they were signing up for and they were right in terms of the fee they agreed to work for. **What they hadn’t**

imagined is how others on the field might be treated. Their response wasn't about whether a denarius was a fair wage for a day's work. Their response was about whether it was right for them to be paid the same as someone who only worked a few hours. These workers were taking issue with what felt like an unfairness in which they were the victims. This sense of unfairness led to anger and resentment towards their employer. They complain to him at the perceived injustice of it all.

5. The landowner gets why they're angry, but he's not persuaded that he's done them any wrong. In his mind, he has paid what he promised to each of them. In the case of those who worked later in the day, he has given them perhaps more than they expected, but he gave them what he believed was right, and as he points out, that was his right to do. It was an act of compassion, of generosity. **And if he wants to be generous with his resources, why should anyone fault him this?** Why must these workers begrudge their neighbors the good fortune they had had?

III. Hopefully what I just described was a good summary of what's happening in the story. **So what kind of responses do we think Jesus was trying to provoke in his listeners by sharing it?** How was he trying to shape the faith of them? How might he be trying to shape our own? I think it depends on where you're coming from. This story features multiple characters with different life experiences and perhaps in the same way it is meant to provoke us in different ways, depending on from which place in society we encounter it.

A. So before I say more about what might be happening with some of the different characters, I want to name that there's something about this very old story that reminds me of a more contemporary conversation. In recent years our collective has been having a much needed conversation about the difference between **equality and equity.**

1. Perhaps you've seen a graphic like this. It's a popular one in my kids' schools. Yes, it's overly simplistic in some ways, but it's effective in communicating a core truth: **that ultimately to create a more just society, we don't need to give everyone the same thing, known as equality. We need to give everyone what they actually need to thrive. This would be equity.** When we acknowledge that our cultural systems of oppression have privileged the access of certain people, particularly straight, cisgender white men, to resources that help them thrive like land, like education, like employment opportunities, we recognize that we need to do more for those who have been denied that access to help close the gap. The trans woman of color might need more support in thriving than the straight white man. Treating everyone the same doesn't make things more just; it only continues to perpetuate the unjust systems.

2. I wonder if millennia before this conversation about equality verses equity, Jesus wasn't trying to point us in a similar direction.

B. Jesus' story features this master of a house whose economics don't seem to fit our capitalist society. The landowner doesn't seem to be motivated by exploitation of labor. He doesn't primarily seem motivated by profit generation. If these were his motives, he would pay each person as leanly as possible, achieving maximum efficiency. Those who started working at noon would get half a denarius only so the profits could be maximized. This, you might say, would be equality - paying every the same hourly wage rather than the same daily wage. But this doesn't seem to be the way this landowner works.

1. **His primary interest seems to be the welfare of his laborers - all of them.** He wants to make sure that no-one goes hungry tonight; not those who have worked for him all day, nor those who spent most of their day waiting for an opportunity to work. Everyone needs something to eat, and everyone by the end of the day gets it. No, the denarius

isn't a fortune for anyone, but it will keep each laborer and their household fed for another few days.

2. The master isn't as concerned about how much each person contributed to the whole, **he's concerned with what each worker needs in order to thrive**. This for him is the wage that is "right". Yes, on one hand he needs work done, and he's compensating these folks to do the work that will benefit him. But he also wants to use his resources in an openhanded way, in a generous way, that invites folks in to the dignity of participating, giving everyone meaningful work, while also making sure that no matter what obstacles blocked them from coming in sooner, all have what they need to move forward.
3. So how are we to view this head of household? **Many Christians since this story was first told have understood Jesus to be telling an allegory of some sort with God in the role of the landowner**. And it's certainly possible that Jesus did intend this understanding. From this point of view, God is one who sees what each person needs and wants to supply those needs, even if it means greater abundance and generosity directed toward some rather than others.
4. But if Jesus was trying to make a point here about the economy of the Divine, **I don't think it was *only* meant to describe the way God sees us and thinks about the distribution of resources**. In one of the ways this parable provokes, Jesus seems to be inviting those who have resources of their own to consider following the Divine model. **He's challenging the wealthy to consider how they might be more like this unique landowner**.
 - a) OK, so perhaps none of us owns a vineyard or maybe any large piece of property or business to speak of. Still, we too may have the privilege of having some control of resources, some household we could say we are master of (whether or not we are home-owners). To us, I think Jesus' story prompts a challenge: **What might it mean for you to consider the way you distribute the resources you have to be less about maximizing profit, less about what's most economically savvy from a capitalist framework, and more about generously participating in acts of equity?** How might that impact your spending? How might that affect your hiring, if you have the capacity to hire? How might it impact who you do business with and who we don't?
 - b) **And of course financial resources are only one way in which we have the capacity to pour into one another**. Letting Jesus words provoke us further, we might ask what other resources could we be openhanded with? How might we use our time as a resource to be distributed? How might we contribute to others our gifts, our talents, that which we do well? What access to resources or opportunities, what personal connections might we have that we could leverage for others with greater need for them than ourselves? And what even about our words and acts of care and compassion; our intentional acts of kindness? How might we distribute our willingness to listen openly to another's pain and reflect back care? Or our ability to show up with a cooked meal or a ride or a set of moving boxes? How might we think about releasing those resources in ways that help others thrive and bring greater equity?
 - c) This to me is the first way this parable provokes, it challenges us to consider what resources we have that we could deploy differently for the benefit of the community, for the furthering of equity. As scholar Amy Jill-Levine points out, "[Jesus'] focus is

often less directly on “good news to the poor” than on “responsibility of the rich”.

Jesus is calling the rich to step up.

5. Of course, the master of the house is not the only character in this story. Some of us might resonate more with a different set of characters. **Let’s consider for a moment the beneficiaries of this alternative kind of compensation:** those who experienced the grace of receiving enough, even though they didn’t have the opportunity to have worked as many hours as others hired before them. We don’t know quite what these folks expected, we don’t know if they were surprised or not the moment they were payed, but I think its fair to imagine **that they were pleased by the outcome and grateful to the landowner who provided it.** Because of that landowner’s focus on their well-being over their productivity, they were able to feed their families. Because they were given more per hour than others, at the end of the day, they had enough.
 - a) I wonder what encouragement Jesus might have intended this story to offer those who have not had the same opportunities as others have had to provide for themselves; have not had the same privileges and access to secure what they need to thrive. Perhaps this is intended to be encouragement to those who find themselves waiting on the side of the road, being overlooked or even held back, wondering when their opportunity will come: Jesus is telling them **“God sees you. God cares for you. The Divine is committed to you receiving everything you need.** Your speaking up, your showing up, your advocating for what you need, just like those workers still standing in town looking for work at 5 pm - all of these efforts are not in vain. God is with you and the Divine is calling others to join and participate in the work of peace and justice-making. God is calling the Divine kin-dom to be participating in the making of greater equity.”
 - b) I think Jesus might also be encouraging these folks: **where blessing and opportunity come your way, receive them fully and without hesitation.** Take in all the reparations that are given to you without embarrassment or apology. These are gifts intended for your thriving. When they come your way: receive them.
6. Finally, we must consider the characters who seem to get **the biggest poke in Jesus’ provocation: the grumbling workers who resent that they have not been paid more than a denarius.** These are the ones who like myself as a child with their sibling, cry “no fair”!
 - a) These folks remind me of our graphic: they see injustice, but that’s because their focus is on the size of each person’s box. They’re thinking about things from an equality frame, and stuff doesn’t look equal. Why isn’t her box the same size as mine? **Their focus isn’t so much on whether they have what they need, but on how what they’ve received compares with others.** Now described this way, it may be easy for the relatively privileged and justice-minded amongst us to feel distance from these folks. “I’m for affirmative action” we might say. “I support Black Lives Matter”! But when it comes to the actual work of letting go of that which we feel entitled to, when it comes to seeing someone else get an opportunity we would have loved to have had, when it comes to the other kid in the household getting a Cabbage Patch doll too, resentment rears its ugly head.
7. Many of you know of the social researcher and best-selling author, Brene Brown. In her most recent book, *Atlas of the Heart* she takes her readers through an exploration of different human emotions, trying to adequately describe and categorize the variety of

things humans feel. **Here's what I found interesting about what Brene Brown says about resentment.** First she describes her own experience with the emotion:

a) *For years, I assumed that resentment was a form of anger related to my perfectionism. I felt mostly resentful toward people whom I perceived to be not working or sacrificing or grinding or perfecting or advocating as hard as I was. You want to see me go into full-tilt resentment, just watch someone tell me, "Yeah, I stopped working on it - it's not exactly perfect but it's good enough," or "I know it's due tomorrow, but I'm wiped out so I'm packing it in" or "I don't get involved in those issues - they really don't affect me."*

8. Then Brene describes a light-bulb moment she had when interviewing another author and researcher on emotions, a guy named Marc Brackett. She asked him his take on resentment, asking if he thinks it's part of the anger family. "No", Marc replied, "Resentment is part of envy."

9. For Brene, when she heard that...something clicked. *Oh!* In her words:

a) *I'm not mad because you're resting. I'm mad because I'm so bone tired and I want to rest. But, unlike you, I'm going to pretend that I don't need to.*

b) *I'm not furious that you're okay with something that's really good and imperfect. I'm furious because I want to be okay with something that's really good and imperfect.*

c) *Your lack of work is not making me resentful, my lack of rest is making me resentful.*

10. As Brene describes it, resentment is usually connected to an unmet, perhaps even unrecognized need. After her ah-ha moment she describes how she now thinks about resentment:

a) *When I start to feel resentful, instead of thinking, "What is that person doing wrong?" Or "What should they be doing?" I think, "**What do I need but am afraid to ask for?**"*

11. **What do I need but am afraid to ask for?** How often do those of us who find ourselves pricked by resentment stop to consider that? How many of us are carrying unacknowledged needs and letting them fester into resentments? There are probably all kinds of needs like this: for Brene, the need for rest. For myself as a kid: I think it was perhaps the need to know that I was special and worth celebrating apart from my sister. For the workers who started at 6 am in our story: perhaps at a deeper level they needed to know their work was valuable and appreciated by the landowner. How often do we resentfully focus on others and look away from our own need? What might it mean if we could acknowledge what we needed instead and allow that to be honored? Perhaps those workers would have been able to receive the truth that their labor was valued and so they were fairly compensated for it, without begrudging others who received more generosity than they, so that their needs could also be met.

IV. So through this story, **Jesus seems to be inviting us all to participate in this alternative economy: where resources both financial and otherwise are generously distributed so that all have what they need.** As we begin Lent together, I want to challenge us to move from grasping that concept to trying to enact it. So here now, I give you our potential Lenten Practices for this week.

A. We won't go through these all now, but you'll see **that there are three sets.** In a moment as we close, I'm going to invite you to have a moment of reflection with the Spirit and consider where you feel most connected to this story. It's possible that we might each connect with different characters in different parts of our lives, but I'm going to invite you to discern which character feels the most resonant for you right now: the landowner, the late hires, or the first-hires. Depending on where you're connecting, I have three suggested practices for you

- one to aid in connection with God, one to aid in connection with yourself and one to aid in connection with others. I encourage you to make time for each of them in the next week, and as we begin to do these things along side each other this Lent, I look forward to hearing stories from one another on what we learn.

- B.** So as we end, I'm going to invite you to take a moment and have an interaction with the Spirit, who I believe is present with us and reveals truth as we quiet ourselves and listen to the deep knowledge, the still small voice that rings inside of us. ... (Lead through meditative moment with God to help highlight which character they connect with and give the week of practices to the Divine.)

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. Which of these characters resonated the most for you? Why do you think that is?
2. Have you seen examples in your life of the work of equity being enacted in some practical way? How did that impact you?
3. How do you see resentment connecting with an unmet need?