

JUSTICE TRANSFORMED

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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.'

I bet there is not a person in this room who, either as an employee or as an employer, would be okay with something like this happening at our place of work. Hearing this parable, we grumble right along with the first workers. They have a valid point! What happened is not fair. It sets up all sorts of bad precedents. It is insulting.

If you feel even the slightest bit angered or annoyed by these latecomers getting paid as much as the all day laborers, then this parable is written for you.

Let me give it some context.

The early Jerusalem church was heavily comprised of Jewish converts to the Christian faith. People who had the appropriate background for understanding why Jesus was the King of the Jews. People's whose religious observance amounted to hard work put in over long years in the scorching heat. They were in the majority. And all of a sudden non-observant Gentiles are not only welcomed, but they are to be considered *equals* in the new covenant? These people who came late? These people who haven't earned their place?

Here's why this is one of my personal favorite passages.

Most of us read this parable and think that we are the all-day workers. That's who we are in our professional lives. We work hard. And we have all at some point in our lives complained that a thing is not fair. But in *this* parable, most of us here today are not the all day workers. We are Gentiles, that is most of us were not born to Jewish parents. Therefore, most of us are actually the latecomers in this parable. We are the workers who came at the end of the day and got paid the same for doing much less work.

We are welfare recipients. Beneficiaries of grace.

If we rethink our lens a bit, it seems we should be grateful when we hear this parable, not angry. So much in life is affected by our perception. And we perceive what we're primed to perceive. The way we hear this story tells us something about our spiritual condition as individuals. Are we angry? Or are we rejoicing?

If nothing else, the parable is a good reminder that gratitude is one of the best lenses through which to view the world. That's why our grandmothers taught us to count our blessings.

But there's much more to this parable than just remembering to be thankful.

There is a striking thematic contrast in this parable that needs to be brought out into the open: On the one hand, we have a clear voice which represents

the human tradition of justice. On the other, we have a voice which represents God's vision for justice.

Let me parse them out a bit.

The human tradition of justice is essentially driven by the primal emotive response to an experience of unfairness. A desire for fairness is hardwired in us for survival. A study at the University of Missouri found that babies as young as 10 months old are capable of becoming angry due to being served a smaller portion than the baby in the next chair. It is this notion of justice which motivates the angry vineyard laborers and which, if we're honest, motivates you and me to sympathize with their complaint. It is the same notion of justice which underlies our justice system. We tend to think the purpose of the justice system is to make sure people get what they deserve. People who are "brought to justice," are forced to pay a price for their misdeeds, until they have made things right. Until, as we say, they have done their time, paid their price to society. Then we say, justice has been served.

I don't want to disparage the justice system. We certainly need it and benefit from it. And we need to support its continued improvement.

Let me give one example: our so-called corrections programs, our prisons. In many cases, our corrections system fails to correct anything. It just hardens people. Makes them even less human than they were when they entered. I believe corrections facilities are so expensive and ineffective because they are based on a limited vision for justice. This human vision of justice is based in anger and fear, and it doesn't look globally enough at the causes of crime. It's a band-aid on a cancer. It doesn't address poverty, illness, lack of education, economic hopelessness. It can't say anything about power or privilege. It is reactive, not pro-active.

Let me talk now about God's view of justice which is represented by the landowner.

God has a much better view of the grand scheme than we do. And God's version of justice is much broader than ours. It is a cutting edge plan that would work if each member of the church had the courage to execute it. God's justice is defined very

consistently throughout the Old and New Testaments, in the law and the prophets and in the life and legacy of Jesus Christ and his Church. This biblical version of justice has nothing at all to do with fairness. It is not rooted in self preservation, fear or reactive anger, but in pro-active and creative *generosity*. It is rooted not in self preservation but in *other* preservation. Other transformation. In the bible, justice is showing first attention to those who need it most. Showing first attention to those who need it most by planting seeds of generosity.

This is the prime driver behind what's known as liberation theology. And why the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican2 started to officially teach what's called God's preferential option for the poor.

It's not that the rich are not beloved of God. Quite the opposite, actually. It's that God sends us first to places where the suffering is greatest. If you have ever found yourself staring out your bedroom window, wondering how to find God, liberation theology says, "Well, Did you check at the homeless shelter? At the hospital? At the jail? Jesus hangs out down there a lot. You're bound to find him there."

In such a beautiful setting as this room and this community, it's easy for us to forget that Jesus was born in a barn. He recruited fishermen to be on his board of trustees. He came to us walking among the lowly and talking about the Kingdom of Earth-as-it-is-in-Heaven. This kingdom of justice and generosity was what he spent his time hoping for. It was big enough that he gave his life just that we might catch a glimpse of it. And it is the hope and the mission of the church to promote.

Let's talk about church for a second.

Most people don't really know or care what the church is. They just want to be sure it is socially acceptable. I have to point out that social acceptability is nowhere to be found on the church's job description.

Keep in mind that the Church, in this parable, is neither the work all day laborer nor the latecomer. The Church is the manager. The one who simply executes the will of the landowner. That's who each Christian is called to become in baptism. Wherever our lower self is in this parable, we're

called to transcend it and meld into the will of God. We are called to rise in the ranks to management. We're called to get a promotion. For us, getting this promotion is at the heart of Christian transformation. We're going to talk a lot about transformation this year at St Mark's. And transformation is basically this: A change of heart that leads to a change of life. Transformation means evolving from an old way of being human to a new way of being human in the forgiveness and healing power of Jesus Christ. Transformation is

having the purpose for our lives change from human to divine. To walk the hard journey from crucifer to crucified: from life taker to life giver. Transformation is Humanity forged together in the image of Christ, mobilized for the doing of God's work.

As Moses said to the Israelites, "this is the bread the LORD has given you to eat."

Amen.