

(No bulletin was received for this week but here are the Points to Ponder and Nourishment for the Journey!)

## **POINTS TO PONDER** for Sunday, September 20, 2020

### “Seeking Racial Equity and a Just Economy”

The theme for Just Peace Sunday 2020 is based on the lectionary passage in Matthew 20 in which the owner of the vineyard suggests a form of economic relations not based on a transactional sense of fairness, but a deeper call to justice and restoration. “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” (Matthew 20:4)

This year, Just Peace Sunday takes place at a time in which systemic racism is being exposed not only through the repeated examples of physical violence against black lives as witnessed in the shootings of Jacob Blake, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others; but also through the generational economic violence that has come sharply into focus this year. The economic violence of slavery, white supremacy, and racism has had a generational impact on black communities and has created the racial wealth gap we see today, a gap in which the net worth of white households is about 10 times that of black households. We are only now starting to uncover the full impact of this gap, but one such metric today are the unequal health outcomes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The inequities of today have never been so clear, challenging us to seek a deeper call to reparative justice and that is based not on what is owed, but on what is “right.” As a Just Peace Church, we are called to take seriously this call to do what is right, seeking racial equity and a just economy for all.

— Rev. Michael Neuroth, [ucc.org](http://ucc.org)

“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.’”

— Matthew 20.1-7

“Jesus used metaphors that his listeners could relate to, describing aspects of society in which they have some familiarity – whether they be of sowers (farmers), fishermen, Samaritans, and even landowners. It is likely that most of his listeners had negative experiences with landowners, and so, as is often the case, Jesus uses imagery that may be consternating at first. Well, even later too!

It was Jewish belief that God created all things, and so God is the cosmic landowner. We are simply the renters, laborers, and stewards of what is God’s, not ours.

Jesus has in other places made clear that he believes the community of heaven, the reality we are all to try to strive to create here on earth, is one in which we are all siblings of one another – all to be loved and treated with justice, respect, and kindness as we seek to live in peace with one another. So it is a little odd that he uses the metaphor of a landowner, an image in which conjures up income disparity between the haves and have-nots. But certainly it would have grabbed their attention.

The landowner we assume is God, and so it makes the metaphor a little more palatable that we know we will at least have a just and kind landlord or boss. But as with all unequal relationships, things seem to break down even when they may seem ‘fair’ from a privileged perspective.

Also of note, the landowner goes to the people, rather than having them come to the workplace, to hire laborers to work the vineyard. This, too, lends itself to the generosity and graciousness of God.

But then things return to normal human ways as a verbal agreement is entered into where a ‘fair’ day’s wages is promised in return for an honest day’s work. Actually, maybe more than honest, as it is a 12 hour work day. Everyone seems happy for the time being, and all seems fair.

The landowner recognizes that those hired at 6 a.m. are not going to be able to accomplish the work that needs to be done for the day. And again, the landowner heads to where the people are to hire more – indeed, 4 other times during the day. It seems that Jesus is implying that the community of heaven requires many workers; maybe even the whole town. This coheres with his vision that all will come to be a part of the community of heaven – no one left out; not even those who show up late.”

— Bret S. Myers, 9/15/2020

“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.”

— Matthew 20.8-9

“Human landowners and managers typically prorate your earnings based on the number of hours you worked. But this compassionate landowner gives those who only worked an hour a full day’s wage. The motive is never stated explicitly, only that the landowner has the right to do whatever with his/her money; provided that no agreements are broken in a way that would be unfair to the workers. What would be your thoughts if you were a worker who received a day’s wage for an hour’s work? Would you not be happy; even elated? Imagine the good feeling of the landowner who has to feel good knowing that s/he made your day. But these are not the only two viewpoints, as we will soon see. What is a celebration for some may not always be celebrated by others. Why is that?”

— Bret S. Myers, 9/15/2020

“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.’”

— Matthew 20.10-12

“Reasoning can be applied in so many different ways – almost always in a way that coincides with one’s own self-interest.

As the first hired see that those hired later received a full day’s wage, they construe this as meaning that these other workers essentially received more than they deserved. They got a whole day’s wage for only a partial day’s work. It is interesting that the first hired don’t initially seem to have a problem with the others getting more than they ‘deserved;’ undoubtedly in hopes that they, too, would receive more than was expected.

But as soon as they learned that they received the same as the others, even though it was exactly what was promised them, they begin to grumble. But they not only resent the landowner; they begin to look at the other laborers as less than themselves -- perhaps in an attempt to sway the landowner’s opinion in giving them more than a day’s wages.

Notice that the grumbling towards the landowner also includes an indictment against those that ‘worked only one hour,’ and that the complaint is not based on a breach of contract in not getting what they were promised, but rather that in being generous to those who worked less hours the landowner effectively ‘made them equal to us.’

Wow, what hubris! And what denial! How often do we see this self-elevation and bashing of the poor in trying to sidle up to the wealthy! The fact that they were all laborers, all equals, and in need of the wages the landowner could provide escapes them. They look at life as a competitive system, not a cohesive one. They ‘respect’ the landowner for having been able to make it out of the ‘rat-race’ and have a life of financial security and material comfort. It is the kind of life they dream of too.

But it is not the life God wants for us. God wants us to see each other as equals, as siblings of one another who are willing to take care of one another like we do family. But these first laborers don’t get it. They saw a way in which might advantage themselves over the others; and they wanted to receive more than the others, not the same, as had been promised. Such is the greediness and competitive nature of us human beings. We can’t even appreciate what goodness comes to others because we are too busy comparing how they got more than expected, and we only got what was expected – even though it was exactly the same amount. The first hired see themselves as first in value and priority – not as equals. They were first in line, so they think this earns them some privilege. They seek to find any advantage over their neighbors that they can obtain, and have the gall to think they have been treated unfairly when they have received the same as others – which is enough for each; but not more than enough. This parable may apply to contemporary American society even more than it did in Jesus’ day. We are far more individualistic, and likely more competitive, than the people of that time. We have too many that are willing to see themselves and others suffer for the chance at being one

of the few who don't. Rather, Jesus would have us build a society where no one suffers, and no one tries to get advantage over others – being content instead with all having enough. In a 'me vs. them' mentality of life, we always compare what everyone receives in relation to what we think we deserve. If others get more than what was promised them, we think we should get even more than that if we have worked longer or harder. This is the selfish mindset of our capitalistic culture.

Rationalizations abound for those who seek to advantage themselves over others. We see in the parable that the first hired go on to say that they have suffered the 'burden of the day and the scorching heat' – nothing, of course, in which they did not know ahead of time, and agreed to, but in which no longer seems to matter to them given their comparative way of looking at themselves in relation to others. So if an appeal to self-interested 'fairness' does not convince the landowner, then it is not beneath them to appeal to pity.

This is not how God wants us to see each other. God wants us to want what is best for each and every one of us, and as a whole society. But too many are enamored by how they can in their own eyes see themselves as better, more deserving, or more worthwhile than others. We still see this divisive way of looking at life in our own society. Is God appalled by our self-centeredness? Will we ever become a society in which we all look out for one another and not simply ourselves?"

— Bret S. Myers, 9/15/2020

"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?"

— Matthew 20.13-15

"I like that the incredulous landowner refers to the first hired complainers as 'friend.' In our polarized society, we too often mistake anyone who disagrees with us as an enemy, rather than a friend who has a different perspective. However, the landowner sets the complainers straight in noting the terms of their agreement. Is it not like us as humans to agree to terms, and then add new terms and expectations based on our own preferences rather than what has been demarcated?"

The landowner reminds the first hired as to their agreement, and then pays them what is owed based on that agreement. In other words, the landowner (God) continues to honor that side of the covenant. There is no punitive measures taken when the first hired become belligerent. The covenant is kept; but boundaries are also asserted.

It is not up to the first hired to tell the landowner what to do with the landowner's money. The choice is purely that of the landowner's. The implication is that we should respect the choices that are rightfully each other's, and not try to eclipse those choices by coercing or meddling in the decision-making of others when it does no harm to anyone. The landowner in the parable does what is right by the first hired, and may be seen as generous to those hired later in the day. And that is the landowner's decision; no one else's.

How frequently we try to get others to act in ways that benefit us, and do not give them latitude in making their own choices in accordance with their consciences. (Pastors mention this dynamic in the churches they serve perhaps more than any other issue; and correspondingly there have been many books written on church life concerning this issue). The surprise and offense taken by the landowner is apparent in the sarcastic retort, 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' The first hired have obviously overstepped a boundary of mutual respect by trying to coerce the landowner into changing her/his thinking in accordance with what the first hired would like to see happen. And there is some implied criticism of character in asking whether it is envy that is the root of this boundary crossing.

The landowner also lays bare the difference in value systems between her/himself and the first hired in stating that the intention was compassion, not unfairness. Fairness has already been granted. And compassion for those most in need is a measure of character, just as envy of others is also a measure of character.

I still hear many objections from people as to what they consider the unfairness of the situation in this parable. But again, those objections are based in a competitive model of social interaction with others, often resulting in a zero sum game, rather than as a collaborative and mutually affirming model of creating peace between people. Rather than disparity of income, power, and other social constructs which derive from human greed and selfishness, is not the better way to see the worth and dignity of each person in the granting of their basic needs? Is this not a more divine value system? It is not the hours worked that matters, but the sacredness of each life itself that matters.

From God's perspective, fairness means each person has enough to sustain themselves and their loved ones, and that the society is predicated on distributive justice in which each has enough to live without having far more than enough...and that this distribution is based on each person's needs, and not their wants.

The landowner (God) seeks to ensure that everyone has an equal salary that will satisfy all their basic needs. How bizarre it is that we have adopted a value system in which we would rather base salary on varying subjective definitions of what type of work is more valuable than other types instead of basing it on the objective notion that we are all of inherent worth regardless of what work we do, or even of our ability to work at all. That we find this odd that God wants to treat everyone equally is itself oddest of all. Why wouldn't we want what is good for each and every person? Why wouldn't we want to create a society in which every person's needs are met sufficiently rather than a minority having all their needs met while the majority suffers, and a much smaller minority having far more than they could ever need while others are dying? That is the height of unfairness. Is not God's egalitarian perspective much more just?"

— Bret S. Myers, 9/15/2020

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

— Matthew 20.16

“I suspect that Jesus uses this phrase more as an attention-getter than as a descriptive portrayal of the value system he is proposing. I doubt that there was a word for ‘egalitarian’ in that day, for such a concept was never experienced in real life, and would be beyond most people’s comprehension based on how all known human societies at that time were constructed. In a world in which it was evident who were the first and who were the last (can we not relate to this in our radically unequal culture?), Jesus’ flipping of the value system was more an encouragement to those who were perennially last to have hope that they would eventually have the basic necessities of life that the perennially first took for granted. It was also likely a warning to the perennially first to proactively do what they can to make the world a more just place, or else lose their soul; if not their privileged position.

It is not that he is actually advocating that the poor become wealthy and the wealthy poor, or that the weak become strong and the strong weak. This would only perpetuate the same abusive and oppressive system – the only difference being who was in power. Jesus is not about ‘the least of these’ becoming abusers and oppressors. Rather he wants a world in which all can live as equals in worth, in equity according to their needs, and in liberation from all forms of oppression and coercion. Is that the world we want? Is it the world we are willing to work toward?”

— Bret S. Myers, 9/15/2020

## **Nourishment for the Journey for the Week of 9/20/2020**

### **Ruminations on Matthew 20.1-16: God’s Economics Is Egalitarian**

Jesus is often loose with his use of metaphor, and doesn’t always avoid the problematic implications of the metaphors he uses. Whether it was intentional, or whether it was a result of the limits of language to describe what he really meant, that may be indecipherable.

Jewish practice recognized ownership of land, but a common thread of thought even in the times before Jesus was that ownership of land is a social construct. The theological truth that belies the social construct is that all the earth is God’s; and therefore not ours. We, rather, are called as stewards to care for that land which is on loan to us to use.

Humans are not, theologically-speaking, ever the true owners of the land. Some would even argue that even God does not own the land, for the very concept of ownership misses the point that all creation is to be enjoyed, shared, and used for the common benefit of all. Indeed, mystic traditions often go beyond even this idea in saying that all the universe, earth, people, animals, and organisms, i.e., every part of creation from the infinitesimal microscopic level to the galactic macroscopic level, is a unified whole. We are all connected to each part, and each part to us, such that the very notion of individual identity is seen as a conceptual inaccuracy. Interestingly, modern physics implies a similar perspective. In a very real way, we are made of stardust; and the atoms that make up our bodies have been existent in many forms in the past, as they will be in the future.

So Jesus saying that ‘the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner’ is likely a linguistic mechanism to try to get his audience to be able to relate to what he is saying while pointing them to a more distant ideal in which they are to strive, but may not have the language to express. It is important to understanding Jesus’ intent to not take his words literally, but to extrapolate what he likely means based on his overall philosophy of life and theology of the cosmos.

If God is the 'landowner' in this metaphor, then it does make sense to the degree that God was supposed to have created all things. Landowners, especially those with much land, require laborers to help take care of the land. We are those laborers; i.e., the stewards of the land. The landowner wants to ensure that the land is adequately cared for, and so beginning in the morning, goes out to hire laborers to take care of the vineyard.

A vineyard is itself an interesting metaphor. It not only provides the sweetness of grapes to eat to sustain our bodies; but also, when fermented into wine, can provide cheer to people's spirits. A vineyard thus provides for the 'health' of people, body and spirit. The implication is that God does the same.

In going out early in the morning, the landowner hires laborers at a fair daily wage – i.e., sufficient income to provide for their needs of themselves and their families. Again, this is implied, but it should be clear that Jesus would consider anything less than what was a liveable wage as unacceptable to his overall ethic of caring for the poor.

The laborers are the poor. They are not artisans or craftspeople who have steady jobs in accordance with their professions. They are often seasonal workers who need to make enough during their seasonal work to last them throughout the year. Day laborers have always been those who have been willing to do the hard work that many others would not find attractive. Jesus tells us elsewhere that the laborer deserves to be paid – again, the implication being a fair wage that will cover their and their family's needs.

Upon hiring those in the early morning, the landowner recognizes that there are not enough laborers to accomplish the tasks that are necessary in keeping up the land. So the landowner goes out again to hire more laborers. Indeed, at five different times of the day, the landowner reassesses what is needed to care for the land, and goes out to gather in more laborers to ensure the work is properly done.

The implication is that stewardship of the land, the earth, is important, and it requires all laborers available to take care of it. There is always a need for us all to do what we can to care for the earth on which we inhabit, and which provides us sustenance – grapes to eat, wine/juice to drink, and work to provide for our other needs.

That the landowner is God becomes clearer when it becomes pay time. Human landowners would most certainly pay a percentage of the work done by the laborers in accordance with the hours they worked. In other words, those who worked a full day (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.) would receive a full day's compensation. And the way the parable is described, the following would be true for the following workers under this human framework:

12 hours = full day's wage

9 hours =  $\frac{3}{4}$  of day's wage

6 hours =  $\frac{1}{2}$  of day's wage

3 hours =  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a day's wage

1 hour =  $\frac{1}{12}$  of a day's wage

From a human landowner's perspective, this seems fair, right?

But God does not think in terms of competing interests and work-time fairness. No, God looks out for the whole well-being of us all – no matter how much or little that we work. God wishes to give us enough to sustain us and our families regardless of our ability or time worked. That is cosmic fairness – where every living being has enough to survive and flourish. In other words, God wants to give everyone a “living wage.”

Some have interpreted this parable in a way that grants God’s graciousness to the ones who worked less than a full day, but still presupposes a capitalist understanding of their plight. I’ve heard it said that God granted the same day’s wage to those at the end of the day only because they were seeking work to do earlier, but couldn’t find it. They tried to find work, and couldn’t, and so God was merciful to them because they were at least trying to find work. But this is not sufficient graciousness for God.

No, God would have provided the day’s wage for those who not only tried to find work and couldn’t, but also for those who, for whatever reason, were unable to work. God does not believe disabled people should die, or that people who have situations in their lives that divert their attention from working for other reasons, should not be able to subsist. God values people as people, and sees their inherent worth. God therefore wants to provide for everyone, whether they work for it or not. That is the dignity of life – of being made in the image of one who is loving, compassionate, cosmically just, and who wants everyone to be able to live in peace with sufficient provisions. Remember Jesus statement about God provides for the birds of the air and all of earth’s creatures? There are no qualifications for God providing for the needs of all other creatures, so why would it be any different for human beings?

Contrast this with how our own society is set up, and we see the radicality of Jesus’ message. In our society, there is only a limited safety net for those unable to work. We literally let people die of malnutrition, lack of healthcare, homelessness, etc., if they are unable to pay for their livelihood; and, of course, that livelihood is contingent, in most instances, in their ability to work. But God values us more than our economic productivity. God values us for who we are inherently. Why? Because we are all connected. To harm any is to harm ourselves.

The landowner in Jesus’ parable does not have his/her own profits and personal well-being as the primary objective in living in society, but rather the good of the whole society and all who exist within it. Giving a whole day’s wages, that is a sustainable amount for which they can live and take care of their loved ones, is God’s objective. This is our birthright. Because we are God’s and have the image of God within us, we are worth being cared for when we are not always able to take care of ourselves. This is not a survival of the fittest mentality, but a compassion for the least of these mentality.

Those who have the blessing of health, body and spirit, to work a whole day should be thankful that they are being given enough to sustain themselves and their families. Those who may have needed to care for a sibling, parent, grandparent, or child for 3, 6, 9, or 11 hours of the day still need to enough to sustain themselves and their loved ones. It isn’t unfair to allow people to simply live. Fairness, in accordance with genuine love for others, means we look out for their well-being, and not only our own. The story of Cain and Abel remind us that we are indeed our brother’s keeper. What kind of parent would deny their children enough to eat or a place to sleep because the child was unable to work for their keep? What kind of society would deny sufficient sustenance for its members with disabilities or other situations in which work is not

possible? What kind of people would even require that work be requisite for caring for individuals regardless of their ability to work?

There is no society I am aware of that has adopted this sort of egalitarian system in which all the needs of all people are tended to independent of their ability to provide for themselves. Some certainly have far more provisions for their people than our own nation, especially the Nordic countries, which not coincidentally always rank among the happiest countries in the world. But even in those countries, some fall through the cracks.

Jesus' ideal was a society in which everyone had enough; and that there would be no one who had far more than enough. Remember his advice to the rich man? While the landowner in this story clearly depicts the compassion and loving-kindness of God for all of God's children and creation, just as a caring parent would do, it also insinuates that the landowners in Jesus' own time should have more compassion for the laborers who work for them. Instead of rationing out a percentage of a day's wage for those who worked less than a full day, the landowner Jesus esteems is the one who sees the need of those who, for whatever reason, couldn't work a full day.

Based on Jesus' other sayings, we can also extend his metaphor to those who couldn't work at all. Indeed, in his society, the women and children would not be able to work for wages. It was the men who needed to be the proverbial breadwinner for the entire family – often including not just their wives and children, but also their parents.

How different the world would work if we adopted values that saw the inherent worth of every person regardless of their work situation. How much more happy, secure, and loved we'd all feel if we knew that we would be cared for if we ever suffered an infirmity in which we couldn't work. How much more compassionate and generous we'd be if we gave everyone, without fail, a living wage for which they could survive. Consider how we'd build a culture in which our creative, artistic, and benevolent practices would not be hindered by thoughts of having to work for a living just to survive.

I have always heard people protest this parable of Jesus, and I have even been among them in the past. But now, I think I finally see what he was trying to point us towards – something far more compassionate than too many can even imagine. Perhaps we have set our sights too low in thinking what it means to be a follower of Christ. If we don't see the worth and value of every person and part of creation such that we do all we can to help them live and flourish, regardless of what they do for us or others, then maybe we have never really understood the egalitarian vision of Jesus.

May we all adopt the mind and vision of Christ!  
— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 9/15/2020