

SERMON: "A FAIR WAGE"

**TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT
NEW TESTAMENT**

**JONAH 3:10 – 4:11
MATTHEW 20:1-16**

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INTRODUCTION

My mom was quite the extrovert. It served her well as a tour guide in Atlanta. She could and often would strike up conversations with random people. The most common Ann Kivett intro was to look over at the table nearby in the restaurant and say something like, "Wow, what is that? It looks delicious."

At times, she'd even ask them to take a bite and tell her how it tastes. I can think of many times people actually did so ... and not only that they would on occasion, offer her a bite. Going out to eat with Annie was an adventure.

I doubt too many of you have had similar experiences. But I do think you've looked. You've seen what they are eating. You've wondered, "Is that any good?" You have not only looked. You have compared yours to theirs, you to them. And I'm not just talking about meals out. I'm thinking in general. We're always looking around, making comparisons.

Isn't that what's going on here in this parable? The last to arrive, the last to work, were paid first and they got a full day's pay. The other laborers noticed how many coins the late arrivers got. And they start thinking ... Hmmm, if those people got that much, I'll probably get more.

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 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 a denarius? 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."

Before we walk around in this parable, let's step back for some bigger picture questions.

One, what this parable is NOT. This is not an economic model. It is not Jesus telling us how to run a business. Yes, he feeds the hungry, heals the sick, teaches about wealth (and what to do with it), turns over the tables of those who made God's house into a marketplace. He does all that, but here Jesus is talking about money to talk about mercy.

WHAT ABOUT?

And two, another big picture question ... what we do with all our comparisons
We're always comparing ourselves with others, how we stack up
Our smarts, their smarts. Our style, their style. Our stuff, their stuff.

In some ways these comparisons can be used for our own good, our own growth.
We hear how she plays and we work harder. Hard enough to make first chair
We see what our competitors are doing and we learn, we grow our business
We use those comparisons to do our best and be our best
Comparisons and competition can be quite productive.

But the other side of that is not nearly as productive, quite the opposite.
We compare ourselves to others and it does NOT help us grow
We get stuck in the comparisons and the 'what about isms'

There is the general 'what about ism' that seems to be a feature of our politics
and sadly our faith. There is the argument of the cynic. Everybody is corrupt
This the logic our parents countered with the thing about everyone else
jumping off cliffs not being a reason to do so ourselves

Then there is the whataboutism that is quick with a false equivalent
No, looting and burning an AutoZone during a protest turned riot
is not the same thing as an organized effort to interfere by intimidation
the certification of a free and fair election by storming the US Capital

And there is the moral whataboutism where we tell ourselves (and maybe others)
that we are better, more right, more righteous than those people
maybe another faith tradition, maybe someone who spends Sundays at Starbucks

And what exactly does all that whataboutism accomplish?
Does it help us win an argument, or win a soul? No! It pushes people away

Isn't that what is going on in this story, counterproductive comparisons?
The laborers in line see that the people who got to work late, way late
got paid a full day's pay. I'll admit I've grumbled in line before
Patience is not my strong suit. I admit I'm impatient with patient people
But it is not just patience (or lack thereof) that gets us grumbling

It is the whataboutisms that gets us murmuring
On that pay day it probably started with some 'what about them'
"Look at these ne'er do wells showing up just before quitting time
They haven't even broken a sweat. And they get full pay?"

The 'what about them' leads to a what about me (or vice versa)
And the comparisons get cranked up. 'If they get that much,
Surely I will get more. I did more. I deserve more.'
You ever feel that way ...not just I deserve better
but I deserve better than them?

WHAT IS FAIR?

Jesus tells the parable and makes it clear the first workers got a fair wage
He points that out at the beginning when they reach an agreement
for one denarius (one denarius = one day's pay for a laborer)
And he points it out again at the end in response to their grumbling.

No one is being underpaid, no one is getting less, no one is being cheated.
The lowest paid worker gets one denarius.
The highest paid worker gets one denarius. It is a fair wage
The problem here is not someone getting less
It is someone expecting more ... those comparisons again.

It sure seems to me that Jesus is talking about money to talk about mercy.
Listen again to his response to the grumbling and what he says
just before the saying about the last being first and the first being last

But Jesus replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 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.'

Are we envious, jealous (or judgmental) because God is generous?
'Yes, I sincerely appreciate your mercy to me, for my not so bad shortcomings.
And I get it, you're really merciful. I get it with the people who got to work
at 9:00 and even those who got here at noon (even though I've been here
since sun up) ... but the people who got here at three and at five?

Shouldn't there be some kind of work requirements for these benefits?
In this story, everybody does some work. Some do more. Some less.
In this story, everybody gets paid and paid the same - a fair wage
Is that fair? Is God's mercy fair? And what if it is not?
What if those who need more, get more?

The way I read this story, I think Jesus is quote, unquote preaching to the choir
It comes after he tells his followers they must have the humble faith of a child,
after he tells a rich man to put his treasure in heaven, and after Peter talks
about how they left everything and faithfully followed him
Sounds to me like he's serving up some humble pie

I think Jesus, with this parable, is warning us about those comparisons.
Yes Peter, you have done good work. Yes, Presbyterians, you have been good.
But don't start grumbling and acting like you are better than the average bear
We don't need church folks acting all holier than thou

Does that do the world God so loves any good?

SUMMARY

It reminds me of a bumper sticker, one I still can't decide if I love ... or loathe
I saw it on the way to church back when we lived in Georgia
I was behind that car for about 10 minutes. It read in big print
"Jesus loves everyone" and then in slightly smaller print, but still large
and bold, it continued ... "but I am his favorite."

You might see why I both love and loathe that sentiment
If that person seriously believes that ... ugh, pull my hair out
But if that person is making a joke, poking fun at the times
we church attending folks act like we are more beloved
then I laugh at the joke (and myself) a good belly laugh

Oh, those comparisons can sure be tricky and trip us up
We can get tripped up thinking that we are just not good enough
AND we can get tripped up thinking we are good enough, better than
We trip up comparing their best to our worst on one hand
and, one the other, comparing our best intentions to their worst actions

Isn't the obvious truth that we all need mercy? Period

And when it comes to mercy, Jesus makes it clear in parables
and in his very person ... God is generous enough for us all
from the first to the last and the last to the first