

This may not be the most infuriating story in the bible, but it has to be near the top of the list. If you can read this and honestly not feel even a little put out, go ahead and go to brunch: you get a pass; there is no more enlightenment for you here. The way Jesus tells this story sets us up to sympathize with and be offended right along side the laborers who started first thing in the morning and were paid the same as those who only worked an hour. The ending is supposed to make us angry; it's an affront to our understanding of what is fair. Before we even understand right and wrong, as children we have a sense of what is fair: if you've got two kids and three cookies, somebody better be breaking that third cookie into very precise halves. As we grow up, our understanding of what is fair, just, equitable, and right becomes more nuanced, but we never like feeling that we've received less than we've earned, and we really don't like it when it seems that someone else has gotten more than they deserve. Of course, a lot depends on where we see ourselves in the story.

Scholars have deduced that Matthew wrote his gospel for a church made up of both well-established religious people and new believers with different piety and traditions. So, the first folks to hear this story may have heard it as an instruction for long-standing members to be more gracious and inclusive of newer members. But before we spiritualize this story to make it just about attitudes within Christian fellowships or who we can expect to see in life after death, let's take the story at face value and ask what Jesus is telling us about God's vision for *this* life *before* death. If we think this story is only about scolding us for being cranky that deathbed converts gets to go to heaven when we dutifully put in an hour every Sunday morning our whole lives, then the stakes are pretty low. This story requires much more of us if the kingdom of heaven is like this landowner as Jesus says it is, and the kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven...you know, what we pray for all the time.

This parable may be more offensive to us than it is or has been to many other believers in other times and places because the values of God's economy that are revealed in this story are uniquely opposed to the values of our twenty-first century American economy. In the parable, in the kingdom of heaven, everyone receives a denarius, which was the daily wage needed to provide all the basic life necessities for a family. Everyone's needs were met in God's economy. In our economy, we don't think that's fair. So, whereas 69% of the world's population has access to universal healthcare, we don't. 186 countries have some amount of guaranteed parental leave; we don't. 185 countries mandate paid vacation time, with, coincidentally, Iran topping the list at 53 paid days off, compared to our requirement of 0. 26 countries have a federal minimum wage that exceeds basic living expenses. The math wizards at MIT created a Living Wage calculator to account for food, housing, utilities, transportation, healthcare, so on: they determined that the living wage needed to provide all that here in Blair County is \$20.85 an hour; our minimum wage is \$7.25—unchanged for the last 17 years. If that

vineyard was located here, even those laborers who worked all day wouldn't get a whole denarius—let alone all the workers who put in fewer hours. If we don't even believe in a livable wage for full-time workers, how unfair do we think it is for those hired at 9, noon, 3, or 5 to have received the daily wage? You can see why this parable makes people angry.

Our culture also teaches us to make some ungenerous assumptions about why those who were hired last weren't hired at the beginning of the day. They were probably still in bed when the landowner first came looking for help, right? Maybe they weren't eager or ambitious enough in putting themselves forward, or they had a bad reputation as substandard workers, or they weren't as physically fit and capable as the others...but that's not what the text says. When asked why they're still not working, they say "Because no one has hired us." And I don't know what your work experience has been, but workers usually don't have the ability to hire themselves.

The all-day laborers don't get angry when they first see the others being paid a denarius. Nobody is getting rich here, and maybe even those first workers can appreciate that the last hired were getting what they needed to take care of their families. The problem comes not when the last workers receive enough but when the first workers receive the *same*—also enough—but not more. Their complaint says it all: *you have made them equal to us*. They knew they were supposed to get a denarius. If they're only getting a denarius, and other workers put in fewer hours, then the only fair thing is for the last hired to take home less than a denarius—even if, so far as we know—they spent all day in the marketplace trying to get work, and even if they won't be able to provide for their families on a fraction of the daily wage.

But here's the thing: the landowner never agreed to do what was fair; he promised to do what was right: *You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right*. In the kingdom of heaven, it's not right for families to go without food. In the kingdom of heaven, it's not right for willing workers to be un- or under-employed simply because they weren't lucky enough to be hired. In the kingdom of heaven, it's not right for someone who has more than enough not to be generous with those in need. In the kingdom of heaven, it's not right for us to be envious of that generosity when it's shown to others. In the kingdom of heaven, we have to admit that God loves other people every bit as much as God loves us.

If this story rankles us, either because we can't imagine the practical economy working this way, or we can't imagine God's grace working this way, that just shows us the distance between where we are and where God is—and therefore where God wants us to be: that is, so committed to loving our neighbors as ourselves that we want for them is every bit as much as what we want for ourselves. The God who fed the same manna to every wandering Israelite in the desert gives the same grace to each of us in the kingdom of heaven. When we pray for our daily bread, and for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, may we not be envious when we see our generous God answer our own prayers.