

At the Eleventh Hour

Matthew 20:1-16



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Isn't it interesting that at the end of the day, when it was time for the wages to be distributed to everyone who had worked his land, the owner of the vineyard specifically instructed his manager to pay the workers beginning with those who had worked least and then moving on to those who had worked most? It is as though he wanted to set the stage for those who had worked most to see that those who had worked less than they were given the same daily wage. Indeed, the vineyard owner set the stage for the dialogue that follows. Upon receiving the same payment that everyone else received, those who had worked longest complained against the unfairness of it. "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." Of course, they complained. Of course, they protested the fact that the eleventh hour worker received the same reward as they who had been working since dawn. This just didn't seem fair to them. It likely didn't seem fair to the disciples who were listening, just as it doesn't seem fair to us.

From the perspective of the vineyard owner, however, fairness doesn't seem to be what was at stake. A fair wage or just payment for work done does not seem to be his main concern. He seems to anticipate the difficulty of this lesson, and he leverages it to make the point he wants to make. Briefly addressing the charge of unfairness made against him, he responds by saying, "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." Getting that issue out of the way, he now hones in on what he sees to be the heart of the matter. He says to the laborers, "I choose to give to the 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?"

There are some economies that so nickel and dime everything that there is no room for choice, gift, and generosity. That seems to be the kind of economy to which the laborers in this parable were accustomed. Those who had worked all day were surprised to learn that the reward really had nothing to do with what they earned, but everything to do with what the vineyard owner desired and decided to give. And those who had been standing around idly all day until the eleventh hour were surprised to be paid as much as everyone else. For anyone who was accustomed to an economy in which work was always a commoditized transaction, you can imagine the shock.

It reminds me of Isabel Wilkerson's description of the 1920s cotton-picking economy of the deep South. In her beautifully written book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, she gives us a glimpse into the mean economy of the cotton kingdom through the eyes of a character named Ida Mae. By her own admission, Ida Mae was not much help in the field. "She had never been able to pick a hundred pounds" (97). According to Ida Mae, "one hundred was the magic number. It was the benchmark for payment when day pickers took the field, fifty cents for a hundred pounds of cotton in the 1920s, the gold standard of cotton picking. It was like picking a hundred pounds of feathers, a hundred pounds of lint dust" (97). "It was a mean enough world that people got desperate. . . . Some people collected rocks, hid them in their pockets, and threw them into their sack at weighting time to make a heavier load. Some people picked the stalk and all to add extra weight. Some were the first out in the morning, picking early while the dew was on the bud, which meant much of the weight was water. It was a trick they could get away with unless the planter set the cotton out in the sun to dry it out, which some did" (99). Isabel Wilkerson's description gives us a window into the very mean economy of the cotton kingdom in which there would have been no room for gift and generosity.

An economy in which there is no room for gift, for generosity, is what, I think, the parable Jesus tells challenges. He challenges it by contrasting it with the kingdom of heaven. Remember, Jesus begins this story by telling his disciples, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." By telling this story, Jesus wants to teach us something about the very

generous nature of the kingdom of heaven. Gift and generosity are everywhere in the story. To be sure, generosity is present at the end of the day when the wages are finally distributed. And, if we listen carefully, we can find generosity throughout the day, every time the invitation to work is extended in the first place. Multiple times - early in the morning, then at 9 o'clock, and then again at noon, 3 o'clock and 5 o'clock, the vineyard owner goes out and invites anyone and everyone he sees to work.

Issues of work, we know, are so very complicated. When people are not paid a living wage for their work, when women have not been paid the same as men for doing the same work, when some people have too much work to do while others have not enough or none at all - these are all serious socio-economic issues that deserve to be addressed, but they do not find address in this parable. This particular parable, I think, looks at another valuable issue of work, and we might miss it, if we, like the laborers in the parable, only treat work as though it were an economic transaction. Making arguments neither about how much people should be earning nor even about the fairness of their wages, Jesus instead focuses here on the invitation that is extended to everyone to take part in the work of God's kingdom.

It shouldn't be surprising to us that the work to which we are invited to engage for the kingdom of heaven differs radically from work that is part of an economic transaction. There is perhaps no other body of people who would have more insight into this difference than you, the church. You make up an inspiringly hard-working congregation. Teaching our youngest that God loves them, making music to worship God, going on mission trips, transforming our Sunday school classrooms into bedrooms for families who are temporarily homeless, caring for the grieving, reading with elementary school-aged children, empowering us to be peacemakers, and preparing to host the entire community this Saturday at our Fall Fair, you do all these things and more, all the while not for pay. While we all know that there is, without a doubt, an economic dimension to the work we do, our whole mode of operating nevertheless differs qualitatively from economic transactions. Part of the reason for this is that the mission of the church, its whole reason to exist, is to increase a kind of capital that cannot be measured as economic capital can.

Dutch economic historian Arjo Klamer makes distinctions that I think are illuminating and useful for us. Dr. Klamer explains that while we usually think of capital in terms of economic capital, there are other less tangible kinds of capital that are nonetheless generative of value. Specifically, he identifies cultural capital and social capital.

Cultural capital he defines as "the capacity to inspire and be inspired" ("Property and Possession: The Moral Economy of Ownership" in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, 344). Cultural capital is what enables us to be lifted up from ordinary daily life. You might recognize cultural capital in visiting a museum, listening to beautiful music, sitting in this Sanctuary, walking a labyrinth, or attending a worship service. Cultural capital is sometimes what enables artists and intellectuals to experience creativity and insight. It is what enables religious traditions and values to be passed down from one generation to the next. Some might argue that cultural capital generates the most important values of all, because it is what gives meaning to our lives.

The other kind of capital Dr. Klamer describes is social capital. Social capital is the capacity to generate social values like friendship, trust, respect, collegiality, responsibility, and solidarity. Membership in a group is a social good, and if you invest your time, resources, and energy into it, by doing things like hosting a neighborhood gathering, going to Fellowship Hour, giving compliments, writing thank-you notes, caring for people, and spending time with people, you build up social capital, yours and the group's (344). Some people argue that social capital is the most important kind of capital a person or an organization can have.

In an op-ed article published years ago in *The New York Times*, columnist David Brooks wrote about the social capital of friendship. Somebody, he wrote, recently asked him what he would do if he had \$500 million to give away. After reflecting a bit, he found himself thinking about the social institution of friendship. Listing the many benefits of friendship, he then bemoaned its decline in society. He observed that adults, especially middle-aged adults who are busy with work and family, seem to have a hard time building friendships today. When friendships are built, they usually are based on job status and therefore rarely cross class lines. In order to do something about this problem, David Brooks concluded that if he had \$500 million to give away he would

try to set up places like adult camps or retreat centers that would cultivate friendships. He wrote, "I know a lot of people who have been involved in fellowship programs. They made friends that ended up utterly transforming their lives. I'd try to take those sorts of networking programs and make them less career oriented and more profound." He went on to write, "To do that, you have to get people out of their normal hunting grounds where their guard is up. You also probably want to give them challenging activities to do together. Nothing inspires friendship like selflessness and cooperation in moments of difficulty. You also want to give them moments when they can share confidences, about big ideas and small worries."

Reading this article first, my husband carried it over to me, saying, "This sounds like church." I had to agree. What David Brooks envisions as something like a string of camps or retreat centers, I see as a church, a church in which fellowship is built by common work to do not for oneself or one's own group, but for a common mission, a common care. I see church as a community in which friendship crosses over not only occupational and class lines, but also race, socioeconomic, and generational lines. And whenever church prevents me from envisioning an even more comprehensive fellowship that crosses over religious lines, I envision the kingdom of heaven for which the church can work in cooperation with other groups and religious communities. Can you imagine the flow of capital in the kingdom of heaven?

If we think of capital only in terms of economic transactions, we might fail to appreciate and work to build up the capital necessary for the kingdom of heaven. Caring and being cared for, praying and being prayed for, cooperating for a mission greater than ourselves - these are the kinds of actions and interactions that build up the kind of capital needed in God's kingdom. They make up a generous kind of economy, an economy of grace. The point is not that cultural and social capital are completely independent of economic capital. We know that they are not. It's not that economic capital makes no difference in our work for God's kingdom. We know that it does. We know that economic capital can be used to generate greater social and cultural values. The point is that God's kingdom operates by an economy of grace and generosity, an economy in which everyone is invited to work and to which everyone can contribute their time, talent, and treasure. Like the owner of the vineyard, God invites all of us, those who have been here a long time and those who are here for the first time, to build up God's kingdom. There is work for all of us to do. And when we give of ourselves in the company of others, we may likely find ourselves, like the laborers in the vineyard, shocked at God's amazing generosity.