

“Telling Stories of Abundance”

Matthew 20:1-16

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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What are the stories we tell? How do we tell them?

I posed these questions in my sermon two weeks ago. And they came to mind again this week in reading this story from Matthew’s gospel.

Because if I asked you, what would you say this story was about?

Some might say it is about fairness. Others might say it about how unfair life is.

Some might read it and hear a story of how hard it is to get what we deserve. Others might read it and be grateful that we don’t *only* get what we deserve.

Some might read it through a lens of scarcity, worrying that other people having enough means they have too little. Others might read it through a lens of abundance with gratitude for our generous God.

The reality is that we don’t all hear the same story the same way. And another reality is that there are often many possible answers to a single question.

So, what’s the question being answered with this story?

What is the kingdom of God like? That is the question at play here. And throughout the gospels we hear Jesus use a great variety of metaphors to answer that question. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed...it’s like a hidden treasure...it’s like a pearl of great value...it’s like seed being cast by the farmer...it’s like a net pulling in the catch...it’s like the party a parent throws when their wayward child returns home.

And here in this reading, Jesus says, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard...”

And we know this story, right? About every three hours the landowner makes another circle and finds more people who aren’t yet working. And every time he sends them to work in his vineyard. And then, at the end of the day, it is time for everyone to collect their pay. And low and behold, everyone gets the same amount whether they just got in on the last hour of work or whether they had been working since morning.

They all get paid the same.

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And we have so many responses to that.

Too often they begin with the words, “But it’s not fair...”

“But it’s not fair that the person who only worked for an hour got paid the same as the person who worked a long day and through the heat of the day.”

“But it’s not fair that the person who was up early and hard at work didn’t get rewarded for that effort. Apparently they could have just slept in and been fine.”

“But it’s not fair...” we like to say. And, for many of us, that sense of unfairness comes from the disciplined, hard-working, always-producing, never-skimping, never-asking-for-help parts of ourselves.

But sometimes we need to re-read the story to remember that not all of our assumptions are even true.

Because if we want to talk about what’s not fair in this story, perhaps we should name that...

It’s not fair that people who wanted to work were not hired.

It’s not fair when people who didn’t get chosen then couldn’t feed their families.

It’s not fair that at the end of the day, without this shocking decision by the landowner, most of these people would have spent their day not unwilling but unable to make the money needed to support themselves.

Because there’s another thing we often miss. At the end of the day they are all given a denarius. This isn’t much...but it is enough...enough to get them through *that day*, enough to feed their family *that night*, enough to allow them to see the possibility of tomorrow.

John Boller, Executive Director of the Coralville Community Food Pantry and Board Chair for Iowa Hunger Coalition recently wrote an article. In it he said, “In Iowa, one in six of our children don’t get enough to eat. Not because their parents don’t love them or don’t work hard enough. It’s because life is unbearably expensive. Sometimes avoiding eviction means, ‘I’m sorry, honey - there’s nothing for breakfast today.’ Or, ‘No, I’m afraid we can’t afford clementines this month, my love.’

John goes on writing, “Imagine an Iowa where every child gets the food they need each day. My daughter included, of course. But not just her. When I say every child, I

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mean every single one. Not just the ones lucky enough to have parents with decent-paying jobs. Or parents that were born here. Or parents, period” (John Boller, “Imagine Kids with Full Plates,” Sept 3, 2026 at imagineenough.substack.com).

While so often our instincts may go in the direction of complaining about how unfair the landowner, and therefore God, is in this story...perhaps we should instead celebrate that ours is a God not of equality by earthly measures, but a God of radical equality by the measurement of God’s just and loving heart. So, maybe we need to learn to celebrate God’s math, even if our accountant wouldn’t approve.

Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn writes, “This parable reminds us that God is a lousy bookkeeper and invites us to transform our pride, envy, and hardness into joy by admiring and celebrating God’s astounding generosity” (Cleghorn, *Feasting on the Word*, “Pastoral Perspective for Matthew 20:1-16,” 96).

Because that’s what this parable really is about...it is about generosity that grows from a position of abundance.

See, the landowner, the one we understand to represent God, isn’t caught up in scarcity...isn’t worried about not having enough for themselves...isn’t worried about those who receive taking advantage of that generosity. Rather, this parable reminds us that our God is a God who looks at people from a position of abundance, who knows that there is enough for everyone, who offers grace and mercy to all simply because God is love.

So, what are the stories we tell? Do we tell stories of abundance or stories of scarcity? Do we tell stories of celebration when we realize that we have a roll to play in the wholeness of others? Or do we tell stories of selfishness as we complain about anything we have to share? Do we tell stories that claim that there is enough for everyone or do we tell stories filled with fear that what someone else gets reduces what is available to us?

Friends, this parable reminds us that ours is a God of abundance and we are called to be a people of abundance as well. So, look around our community...where do you see signs of abundance?

Two and a half decades ago when this building was being planned, this congregation asked questions about how they could share this space. They didn’t say, “We’re paying for this so we won’t let anyone else use it.” They didn’t say, “But we need all the space, we can’t share it.” Rather they said, “How can we design it so others benefit as well?” And with that they built a building ready to house a daycare, with a kitchen that could be used for commercial purposes, with a Fellowship Hall in which unhoused neighbors were able to sleep in the winter. This building tells a story of abundance.

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In more recent years as we have challenged ourselves to wonder what it means to really welcome children into our worshipping community, we have seen a shift from an attitude of expecting them to behave like little adults or a desire to let them in but put them in the back where we won't be distracted by them to a rug down front where in a place that allows them to see and hear what is happening they are also allowed to lay on the floor and color and fidget and be children. Rather than working to limit or control their actions, this congregation said, "Let the children come and let them be children." This rug tells a story of abundance.

Just this year we set out to partner with Houses into Home with the goal of raising money to build 5 dressers that they would then distribute. When the offering was counted, we had collected enough to build 16 dressers and one night stand...work we will be completing in our final dresser build next month. Those dressers tell a story of abundance.

Stories of abundance say many things...

- They say to our neighbors, "You are as valuable as me. And your value doesn't come in your production or in the ways you look or act like me, but you are valued simply because you exist."
- Stories of abundance say, "My possessions aren't mine to protect and hoard so that only I benefit, but they are mine to share and to use to make the world better."
- Stories of abundance say, "When any of us is hurting, it impacts all of us. When you are well, then so am I. So, I will invest in your well-being"

As people of God we are challenged to tell and to live stories of abundance. What story will we tell next? Amen.

