

A SCANDALOUS GOD: JUSTICE AND JUBILEE

Matthew 20:1-16

In our gospel reading today, we encounter another parable about the Kingdom of God. Jesus tells us that a landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers. The scene immediately reminds us of the many day laborers who stand on street corners in cities all across America looking for work. In the parable, though, it's harvest time so the day-laborers are in luck. As grapes are harvested from the fields, the landowner suddenly realizes there's more work for people to do. And so, he must return to the marketplace to find more workers. And as is the usual case, there are people waiting who weren't picked in the early morning hours. The landowner goes back at 9am, noon, and 3pm and agrees to pay the workers a just wage. When the landowner returns to the market place at 5pm, he is shocked to still find workers available. "Why are you standing here idle all day?" he asks them. Today we might ask ourselves the same question but frame it in a clearer manner. We might ask, "What causes these workers to stand here all day looking for work?"

The context is very similar to today, especially when we find ourselves with an economy in bad shape and with work hard to find. Homeless people, laid-off blue-collar workers, and immigrants gather in store parking lots early in the morning hoping to be picked for construction work or painting or moving furniture or yard work. While some wait on corners and in parking lots, others wait at home hoping to get a phone call from a staffing agency with news of temporary work. Why do day-laborers stand in parking lots and in marketplaces? Not because they are lazy but because they are looking for work and no one is hiring (just like we read in our parable). In the parable, when the landowner hears this, he responds by giving these laborers work in his vineyard.

But Jesus isn't finished telling the parable. There is more to the story. Jewish law required all workers to be paid before sundown. And when the workers come for their payment, the grumbling begins. The workers who barely got their hands dirty get paid the exact same wage as the workers with blisters on their hands who toiled for 10+ hours in the scorching heat. How can this be? Call the union. Form a picket line. This is unjust. It's not right. It's scandalous. The workers have a right to be upset. I would be upset. We would all be grumbling and upset and furious! And the workers do what we would do. They go straight to the landowner to file their complaint. "Why are you so upset?" the landowner asks them.

And the outraged workers respond, "Why are we so upset? I'll tell you why we're so upset – **because you have made them equal to us.**"

Friends, Here we learn what a scandalous thing equality can be. Making people equal with another can ruffle up some feathers and make the blood boil. Many expected Jesus in his day to take company with the super-religious but instead he ate with sinners and tax-collectors, prostitutes and lepers. In Jesus' eyes everyone was equal and because of that, the grumblers in his day accused him of being a sinner and a drunk. Jesus was scandalous. And if that wasn't enough, he even opposed an oppressive empire not with an army of soldiers or with violence but by initiating a radical inclusive community he called the Kingdom of God. Jesus' followers called him *Lord* and *Son of God*, the same titles Roman citizens called Caesar. The message was

clear that Caesar and Rome were no better than Jesus and his followers. This scandalous Jesus became such a threat that the Roman Empire executed him on a cross. Equality can be a scandalous thing.

In the Hebrew Bible in the book of Leviticus, we learn of the year of jubilee. Jubilee was a scandalous principle. In ancient Israel, people realized that it was inevitable for social inequalities to arise in society. It was inevitable for entrepreneurs to strike it rich. It was inevitable that power and wealth might be concentrated in the hands of a few. And so as a way to combat this injustice, the Israelites proclaimed every 50th year as a year of jubilee. A trumpet or ram's horn would sound throughout Israel and the unthinkable would happen: debts were forgiven, slaves were freed, and land was restored to its original inhabitants. In essence, income was redistributed. I can only imagine the grumblings at the time – people saying, “This isn't fair. I worked hard and put in all the work. I earned these assets. This isn't justice. This is socialism! This is stealing from the rich and giving to the poor! Those poor people had their chance to work hard and get lucky in society. They are being made equal to us!”

Friends, the point of jubilee was to remind people that all community assets belonged to God. Jubilee gave people a new beginning. Jubilee redressed the imbalances in society. The last were made first and the first were made last. Jubilee showed the full face of justice – that everyone is equal and is to be restored to a place of standing in God's community. Jubilee showed how God delighted in causing scandal for the sake of justice and equality. Jubilee is a scandalous biblical principle simply because it calls for making everyone equal to one another.

What if we opened our hearts to the biblical idea of jubilee today? What might our world look like then? Where do you think justice and jubilee need to be manifested today? If you need a clue, take a hint from our parable today where we heard workers grumbling because “people were made equal to them.” You can always discern the need for justice and jubilee if you just listen to the grumblings going on in society. Equality is not without scandal even in our modern day.

Can you hear the grumblings today? “Don't give gays and lesbians equal rights, especially the right to marry. That'll make them equal to us! Don't give immigrants a path to citizenship. That'll make them equal to us. We can't have universal healthcare. That'll make those without healthcare equal to those who can already afford expensive healthcare! That'll make them equal to us! Don't tell the prostitutes on Sistrunk Ave that God loves them just as much as God loves us church folk. That'll make them equal to us! Don't affirm the sacred value and dignity of that agnostic and that questioning skeptic. That'll make them equal to us! We can't include a Taoist reading in our liturgy; we're a Christian church. That might make Taoists equal to us.” Can you hear the grumblings today?

Friends, we have a biblical obligation and a Christian obligation to ensure equality for everyone. It is not enough to say we stand for justice. We must stand for a jubilee type of justice. But we must be warned: if we stand for jubilee, we will be called scandalous for doing so and there will be grumblings from people. But the good news is that's okay because God makes the first last and the last first and that may be the most scandalous thing of all. Amen.