

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church>
September 20, 2026
Matthew 20: 1-16

Jesus Was a Subversive Storyteller: *Stories That Won't Behave*
The Parle of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Last week I began a new 4-week sermon series on the parables; titled, **Jesus Was a Subversive Storyteller: *Stories That Won't Behave***. If last week's parable was the easiest of the four we'll cover, today's is probably the hardest. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard makes no sense to us and upsets our idea of what is right and fair. What do you mean the person who works one hour gets us as much as the people who worked all day? In what economy does that make sense? It seems utterly unfair.

A few years ago, Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal, two zoologists at Emory University, decided to study the evolution of fairness. They wanted to explore where our distaste for unfairness comes from. Is it a cultural add-on, or is it hardwired?

To study this question, Brosnan and de Waal designed an experiment using capuchin monkeys. Pairs of monkeys were trained to take turns giving small granite rocks to their human handler, and they were placed in adjacent cages where they could see each other. Each time a monkey relinquished a rock, she would receive a piece of cucumber as a reward.

Capuchins love cucumbers, so both monkeys found this arrangement satisfactory, and handed over their rocks with enthusiasm. But then, the handler changed things up. After a few fair and even exchanges, the handler (as usual) rewarded the first monkey with a chunk of cucumber, but gave the second monkey a grape — the equivalent of fine wine or caviar in the monkey world.

Seeing that the game had changed for the better, the first monkey perked up, and very eagerly handed over another rock, expecting, of course, to receive a

grape (too). But no — the handler gave her another piece of cucumber. To make things worse, the handler then gave the second monkey another grape for free!

The results — which you can look up on YouTube — were striking. The first monkey just about lost her mind. Not only did she refuse to eat the cucumber; she threw it at her handler. She then proceeded to bang against the bars of the cage, throw her remaining rocks in every direction, and make furious gestures at her grape-eating companion.

The experiment has since been repeated using other primates, and the results have been astonishingly similar. Scientists **have also** studied the development of fairness in babies, and found that infants as young as nine months old will react quite strongly and negatively to perceived unfairness. Clearly, as Brosnan and De Waal concluded after their experiment, fairness is a concept that is deeply rooted in the human psyche.

Which brings us to this week's lectionary, and Matthew's parable that might very well lead us to behave like that first capuchin monkey, and throw a few cucumbers at God. Why? Because the parable turns our hardwired assumptions on their heads, and challenges us to consider tough questions about fairness and justice that we'd rather ignore.

Like most parables, the basic story here is simple and mundane. A landowner is desperate to get his crop of grapes harvested. So at the crack of dawn the owner finds some eager folks lined up. There's nothing unusual about this. The typical workday in Jesus' day would have been from sunrise to sunset. So recruiting workers just before dawn was par for the course.

But things veer of course quickly. The vineyard owner goes back at 9 and hires more workers and then again at noon, 3:00, and 5:00. Immediately, we're provoked to wonder why. Because most vineyard owners would have known at the beginning of the day just how many workers were needed. Now, we could jump to conclusions and surmise why. But since the parable never states why, let's just go with the flow.

Because when we do that, we notice that the parable is NOT driven by the landowner's need for workers, but by the workers' need for work. The owner went out about 9:00, saw people without work, and said, "go to the vineyard." Amy Jill-Levine helpfully points out that to say these people were idle, which is what your bible says, isn't accurate. The Greek words are best translated "they were without work". Idleness implies they were goofing off earlier. Notice, too, that the parable never says the owner needed more workers, just that he noticed there were people without work, and he put them to work. At noon and 3, the whole scene repeats itself. At 5, though, when he asks why they're standing there, the people reply "because no one has hired us," to which the owner replies, you also go to the vineyard. The focus, again, is on the workers' need for work. Not the owner's need for more labor.

But there's another dynamic at work here, that is just as important. Notice the first group of workers negotiate with the owner what they'll get paid. Whereas the 9:00 workers are promised they'll be paid whatever is right. Presumably, the same arrangement is made with those hired at noon and 3. But when we get to the 5:00 group, no mention of payment is ever made. They simply go. Differing levels of trust may be at work here, but the details are important at the end of the day.

And here I want to say a word about what this parable is not about. This is not a moral lesson about employer-employee labor practices. The business owners here will be glad to know that! This isn't about paying all your employees the same, no matter when they arrive to work. The parable is not Karl Marx's "Das Kapital" or Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations". It's a parable, and for the sake of this sermon I'll argue that an attempt to treat it as a moral example of economic life overlooks how weird it is. It's not a story about economic structures. It's about God's character and the ethical responses that flow from that. Its implications for life are far more sweeping than economic justice alone.

Need a transition here; maybe rework the next sentence? At sundown, pay time, the parable discloses a breathtaking surprise about God's kingdom. The

owner gathers all the workers, lines them up, and proceeds to pay them all – or to use Matthew’s word, to give them their reward. And he does all of this in reverse order, paying the last to arrive first. At this point, the early birds see the latecomers getting paid one denarius and their internal calculators start to spin. If the latecomers are getting paid one denarius for 1 hour of work, maybe we’ll get more, they think! But to their shock and disappointment, they only receive 1 denarius. And for all we know, like the monkeys mentioned earlier maybe they throw it back in the owner’s face.

We do know they started to grumble and aimed their grievances at the owner. So at this point, the parable is raising the issue of justice and air play. And most of us would probably agree with the first hired workers.

In her book of sermons, *Sensual Orthodoxy*, Debbie Blue has some fun with Jesus’ imagery here. “Who’s up so early?” she asks. The best people are. Admirable, kind and hardworking people. She notes that these early-morning go-getters are commendable people now and were doubtless commendable people then. They didn’t lay in bed repeatedly hitting the snooze button. They showered, combed their hair, dressed neatly and were ready to work by first light. These are the people who have a good work ethic” (*Sensual Orthodoxy*, page. 81). They should be paid fairly for their labors. The early bird gets the worm, and all that stuff. Why, that’s the Protestant work ethic that made this country what it is today!

So is it any wonder this parable rubs us the wrong way. Sure, it’s wonderful that those late workers were paid generously. But come on! If you’re going to be generous with the latecomers, at least be generous with the ones who arrived on time. It’s the only fair thing to do.

This sense of fairness in us is represented by Lady Justice, the allegorical figure of the legal system. You’ve seen her statue. She is blindfolded and holds a balance scale. Because she cannot see who is coming to court, she treats

all appellants equally, and her scale weighs the two sides of every case equally.

It's a good image. But here's the scandal of the parable. God is not lady justice, and God doesn't conform to our sense of fairness or. Consider what the landowner says to the early bird grumbling workers. Friend (best translated (Buster): Buster, I'm doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? In other words, you bargained for a denarius, and you got a denarius. No harm, no foul. You get what you bargain for." And then, to make matters worse, he tells them to take their money and go. "I choose to give to this last what I give to you." I choose to give. In other words, this isn't arbitrary. I'm choosing, deliberately choosing to be generous with what belongs to me, and that is my right.

I mean, talk about pouring salt into the wound! The parable begs the question "IS God fair or not?" And the troubling answer the parable gives is God is not fair, not at all! Because we know what fairness is and what fairness is not: fairness is the contract the early workers made. I give you a day's work, you give me a day's pay.

But God doesn't labor according to our fairness contract. Thank God! God will not be tied down by some contract. And let's be honest about that: it scares the daylights out of us. We prefer a transactional God. But the parable makes the claim that God overturns most of our human constructed values and assumptions about what is fair, and who should be first and who should be last. But this unfair God is also deeply generous. And that seems way better to me than a boring and bureaucratic administrator of tit-tat-for justice.

If you're not yet convinced, consider this:

What if we're not where we think we are in line? What if we were hired last? What if, despite our surety, and confidence, and continued hard work to get to the top, we're not where we think we are?

Because let's just admit that the story sounds quite different from the end of the line, wouldn't you agree, than it does from the front.

I would bet that most of us see ourselves in the front. We see ourselves as the ones who have gotten the short end of the stick; the ones who have been cheated. We are the ones who have gotten up early and worked hard and stayed late and all for what? So some backward householder can come along and start at the wrong end of the line!

That is how most of us hear the parable, but it is entirely possible that we are mistaken about where we are in line. Did you ever think about that? It is entirely possible that, as far as God is concerned, we are halfway around the block, that there are all sorts of people ahead of us.

Suppose for a moment it is us back there at the end of the line, craning our necks, hoping beyond all hope that the vineyard owner will be generous with us, too. What if you were the one at the end of the line, desperate for work, and heard the owner say: "We're starting at this end today." Wouldn't you be glad that the owner wasn't fair, but was gracious and generous beyond explanation?

Friends (buster!), God is not fair, and depending on where you are in line that can sound like powerful good news, because if God is not fair, then there is a chance we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it through the doors even though we are last in line – and not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

God is not fair, let's be clear about that this morning. Which brings us back to those monkeys.

Because apparently, somewhere deep in our primate brains, we really do believe that life should be fair. Give one monkey a cucumber and another monkey a grape, and suddenly the monkey with the cucumber is protesting the injustice of it all.

We laugh because we recognize ourselves.

We want God to be fair—especially when we think fairness is on our side.

But the good news of this parable is that God is not bound by our calculations of who deserves what. God is generous and gracious. And whether we are standing at the front of the line or somewhere way back around the block, God's grace reaches us.

Not because we earned it or deserve it.

But because that is who God is.

generous beyond our explanations, gracious beyond our calculations, and loving enough to keep inviting us into the vineyard.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Sources:

Glenn E. Ludwig, Trinity Camp Hill Lutheran Church, "The End of the Line"

Center for excellence in Preaching, September 12, 2005, content for Matthew 20:1-16

Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven, "Beginning at the End"

Tom Long, Proclaiming the Parables