

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘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; I choose to give to this 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?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Kingdom Economics

The book of Hebrews calls Jesus our Great High Priest but today we have a lesson from Jesus our Great High Economist. He has an economic parable for us today that’s meant to draw us deeper into the economy of God’s Kingdom. Now when we usually talk about economies, we think of a financial system in which goods, services, and resources are exchanged. Even if we couldn’t write a book on economic principles, we understand that this financial system is something we participate in, something that we are subject to, something that has a huge impact on how we see the world and live in it.

But this morning, I would like us to think of “economy” in a more classical way. The Greek here is *oikonomia* which translates to “the ordering or the management of one’s house.” That means that today we have a story about how God’s house is ordered. It’s a story about the economy of

God's Kingdom. So Jesus, in telling us this little story, is asking you and me a question about how we order our lives.

As a preacher, one of the great privileges and responsibilities is that I get to take a passage of Scripture like this and chew on it for a week or two. I get to pray on it, to think about it, to struggle with it for a time. I get to look for it in conversations with you or in the news or in family life. I've been wondering the last two weeks: how do we order our house as a family? How do we order our house as a church? What does God's economy look like?

If you missed the story, I like to tell it this way:

There was a landowner who had a vineyard way out on the edge of Henderson County. It's a place with a beautiful view, a tasting room, and live music every Friday and Saturday night all summer long. There they will pour you a nice glass of red or white wine and they'll be glad to send you home with a few bottles of your choice. When harvest time comes, the vineyard owners need help and they need it fast so they go out and hire workers on a Monday morning to work all week long for \$100/day. On Tuesday, they go out and hire more workers (different ones) for \$100/day. On Wednesday and Thursday it's the same thing. Even on Friday, as the work is winding down, they go out and hire more help for \$100/day. When quitting time comes on Friday evening, everyone gets in line to get paid. The landowner pays the people who just worked on Friday first but rather than give them the \$100 they earned, he pays them \$500. The people who were hired on Thursday come to get paid and they also get \$500. So it is with those hired on Tuesday and Wednesday. Finally, when the people who were hired on Monday get to the front of the line, Jesus says that they thought they would receive more but each of them also gets \$500. They grumble against the landowner saying this isn't fair, but the landowner says to them, "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; I choose to give to this 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?"

Period! And the parable ends right there. Though Jesus says about God's economy, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Right away, if you were keeping up – you don't have to be an expert in labor economics to see it – Jesus' math makes no sense at all. How can those who worked one day get the same pay as those who worked all week long? That is not how you want to run a business at all but this isn't about the economy of our world; it's about the economy of God's Kingdom. And there is even this other point that is being made here. It's sort of like Jesus is saying, "You know, whether you have been here from day one, you have served on every committee, on the vestry, pledged, sung

in the choir – even if you’re clergy – you are worth just as much to God as someone who showed up yesterday after a lifetime of wild living.” Do that math, Jesus says!

Now as I was saying, as a preacher I tend to carry a text with me wherever I go in the week or two leading up to a sermon. I took this economic parable home with me and wondered what it says about the economy of parenting little children which is a rather complex system of negotiations in which chocolate treats are offered in exchange for behavioral compliance. “If you eat all of your dinner, then you will get an ice cream sandwich,” I sometimes say. That is a major part of how we order our house – our economy – and yet this parable seems to challenge the fundamental assumptions of treat-based economic parenting systems, which is why, one day last week, I found myself giving my children lots of chocolate for what seemed to them like no reason at all.

I took this parable with me to Lynchburg, VA on Monday. I drove the long way, heading up through Madison County and East Tennessee to I-81 so I might take in a bit of Shenandoah magic. I was heading to a clergy retreat based on Bowen Family Systems Theory which examines the dynamics of families and congregations based on their emotional processes – a sort of economy of emotions, anxiety, and resilience. It made me wonder about how in Christ, our God stays in relationship with us even when we get anxious and try to cut God off all together, kind of like a generous landowner who can face the objections of grumbling workers by acting out of his principles with confidence and clarity.

On Wednesday of this week, I took this parable with me to Charleston. In Charleston, my wife and I spent time asking questions and learning about our parish’s history in the Low-Country, about the people who founded St. John and who ministered here and the kinds of economies they shared in. I found myself – as you might imagine – with this economic parable, this glimpse of God’s Kingdom, being held up on one hand and the plantation economy being held up on the other. And wondering how our spiritual ancestors – how my Stephens ancestors for that matter – could participate in economies of exploitation in which the only parallel to the incredible profitability for the planting class was the unfathomable suffering of enslaved people. How do they fit into this parable? Can you imagine this very parable being read in this very church while slaves and slave owners sat in these very pews on a summer Sunday morning? I wonder about how they ordered their houses, their church, their property and how it compared to the economy of the Kingdom of God. I wonder about the deepest longings of their hearts.

And that’s the question for each of us today, but especially for you because on Sunday, the ball gets passed to you. The preacher’s task is now fulfilled. Tomorrow he will move onto a new text but the people listening are now invited to spend the week ahead – if not longer – struggling with this sacred story and asking what it means for life and for church. Now I pass these considerations onto you.

I will say this, as you begin your economic observations: I will say that the economies which we participate in like the goods and services economy, the economies of anxiety and resilience, those of race and class and fear – they are all found wanting when we encounter Jesus Christ. He is not just our Great High Economist. He is the King, the victim, the priest, the feast which we keep. He is God's gift – God's self – ridiculously, abundantly, lovingly poured out to welcome us in. He's the one that doesn't add up, the one who thwarts our systems of comparison and competition. He's got his foot on the scale (his body on the cross) to justify us, to make things right for us. He's not just our economist. He's our economy, reordering us and making us whole.