

“Summer of Parables: Labourers and Talents”

Matthew 20:1-16; 25:14-30

Rev. Dr. Tim Archibald

Today in our Summer of Parables we look at two landowner parables in Matthew’s Gospel. About half of the parables in our series this summer were suggested by you. And the suggestion one of you made for today was that these two parables be considered together in a combined analysis—since Jesus seems to be talking out of both sides of his mouth and advocating completely opposite things.

In the first parable, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a big-hearted vineyard owner who at the end of the day lavishly doles out rewards—a full days wage, for everyone—even the ones hired late in the day who worked only an hour. God’s Kingdom is not about merit but mercy. Contrastingly, in the second parable there seems to be a shortage of mercy. A harsh, exacting landowner, rewards **only** those producing a proven profit—declaring that “to all those who have, more will be given—but for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” So which way is it—the economy of mercy or the economy of proven merit?

As you’ve heard me say already—there’s always something that is a bit off in Jesus’ parables and that’s part of the hook. Parables contain something realistic **and** something strange. And it’s at that place of intersection that our imaginations are to linger and consider what kinds of comparisons the parables encourage us to draw between our status quo and the will of God. Jesus’ parables prompt us to imagine how God surprises us and even upends our regular perspectives and convictions about what’s truly possible so that something different can take shape in us and through us.

So let’s begin with the Workers in the Vineyard. Maybe no other words attributed to Jesus cause as much offence to ethical calculations as this parable where hardworking, reliable people seem to get shafted. In this time of supply chain issues and staffing shortages, here comes Jesus to mess with our regular attitudes about what’s right or fair. “Early in the morning, a landowner hires people to work in his vineyard for the going daily wage. This entrepreneurial employer goes out again to hire more people at 9am, at noon, at 3pm and even at 5pm, promising to pay them “whatever is right.” When the hot workday ends, the landowner pays first the folks who laboured only a single hour. To their total surprise they are given a whole day’s pay; the same is given to those hired at 3pm, noon and 9am.” When the ones who laboured the entire long day come forward—they also receive the same amount—exactly what they were promised—the

standard daily wage. But they grumble loudly and complain—“THIS IS NOT RIGHT!” They are enraged!—and understandably so, some of you are thinking. What kind of unjust kingdom is Jesus promoting?—one where the last will be first and the first will be last.

Perhaps your sense of fairness appreciates much better the second parable where those who work hardest reap the most rewards, and where the profit motive receives high praise. A certain man has a great estate. He is wealthy. He has property, can travel abroad and still maintain a staff to work on his behalf while he is gone. The man gives each of three servants, five, two, and one talent— according to their gifts and level of responsibility— and then departs on a very LONG journey.

A talent is a unit of money, a massive amount. In today’s terms one talent would be about \$1million. The first servant is given \$5 million, the second \$2 million and the third, \$1 million—a significant transfer of resources. The landowner takes a significant risk. The entrepreneurial first servant springs into action and doubles the investment. Likewise the second also earns a one hundred percent return. Wouldn’t that be good news from your stock broker or financial manager? The third servant takes the money and buries it in a hole.

When the estate owner returns, the first servant lays down the original five million plus five million more—the master is ecstatic and promises even greater responsibilities. The second servant lays down the two million and then two million more. The landowner is elated, promising a promotion. Then comes the third servant. As soon as he starts—“I knew you were a harsh man...” and you just know that this is not going to go well. And it doesn’t. No risks have been taken, no investments made. The one-talent man has been prudent and careful. And the rapid, violent response of the master is shocking. **All** is taken from this one talent man, given to others; while he is then cast into the outer darkness. “For to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” Does that sound like the Gospel?

Both of these parables hook us—but in opposite ways—a little too much mercy in the first one and a lack of mercy in the second. Yet in the midst of the contradiction is a significantly common theme—our work together for the Kingdom of God. The Vineyard owner wants to grow his labour force; he just can’t get enough workers. In the second parable, the estate owner wants to grow the capacity of his kingdom. Heard together, these two parables proclaim Jesus’ Gospel invitation to more and more of us to personally activate our different and varied gifts to keep growing the capacity of the Kingdom of God on earth. And each parable offers commentary on what can stand in the way of those gifts being fully activated and engaged.

In the vineyard parable, had those who worked the whole day been paid first and dismissed before hearing what others were paid, might they not have gone home happy? They did receive exactly what they were promised. It's comparison that begins the trouble here. Comparison begins early in us—*"Her piece of cake is bigger than mine"*—and over time it grows into a system of measuring people. In consumerism we measure people by money, education, careers, houses, cars, clothes, neighbourhoods and the like. We compare them with ourselves and assemble a kind of pecking order of value—and Jesus hates it.

In the end, the issue is not about unfair payments at all. The full-day workers don't moan that they've been cheated. They complain instead, "You have made them [the one-hour workers] equal to us." It's not the generosity or the extravagance that makes them angry. Rather, it's that the landowner's undue kindness denies the full-day labourers the bonus they think they can claim: a sense of privilege or superiority.

Long timers in the church compare themselves to new folk and begin to think that they have a special say in how things should go—because they've been there longer. They start to expect that everything should be arranged to suit them, their opinions and their wants, their special seating. If not—they grumble loudly. But in reality this entrepreneurial God is out in the marketplace wanting to draw more and more **new** people to work on his team—and wants us to do the same.

In the second parable you may have noticed that a talent was originally a unit of money. What does it refer to now?—the gifts or skills that an individual possesses are my talents. That change of meaning resulted from this parable. In this story the third servant takes his talent and buries it in a hole out of a sense of fear. This sense of fear—that we are not enough—grows in us when our gifts are compared to others and we're afraid that we don't measure up. We say things like, "I would teach in kid's ministry if I had her gifts. I'd sing in the praise team if I had his gifts. I'd support the church financially like some others, if I had money like theirs. I'd speak more about my faith to others if I could speak like him." We can get so focused on our inadequacies that we are unwilling to take risks—which Jesus clearly dislikes. The Message paraphrase in Luke's version of this says: "Risk your life and get more than you ever dreamed of. Play it safe and end up holding the bag."

It's like the story of a 38-year-old cleaning woman who would go to the movies and sigh, "If only I had her looks." She'd listen to a singer and moan, "If only I had her voice." Then one day someone gave her a copy of the book, "The Magic of Believing." She stopped comparing herself with actors and singers. She stopped crying about what she didn't have and started concentrating on what she did have. She took inventory of

herself and remembered that in high school she had a reputation for being the funniest girl around. She began to turn her liabilities into assets. And that person was Phyllis Diller, who at the top of her career in the '60s earned more than a million dollars a year. She may not have been good-looking and she may have had a scratchy voice—but she could make people laugh.

Comparison is a dangerous game in the kingdom of God—causing some to be valued and others to be sidelined—and quite frankly Jesus has no mercy when it comes to this! God wants YOUR gifts working on his team for the Kingdom of God. So what do say? Are you willing to take some new risks, invite some new people, try something you've never tried before?

Are you ready for some Kingdom adventure?