

“Fuzzy Math”

Matthew 20:1-16

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most intriguing parables Jesus told. Jesus used stories, commonly referred to as parables, to make people think and reflect upon their lives and faith. His parables had a way of sticking with people and interrupting them even when they were busy, as all good stories do.

I am confident this parable hung around for a long time and became the topic of many conversations. Listen as I retell it.

A landowner went to the marketplace early one morning to hire people to work in his vineyards, an event which commonly occurred in that culture. Day laborers would arrive at sunup with tools in hand eager to be chosen to work.

The survival of their families depended upon them being selected for work each day. The money they would be paid at the end of the day would be used to buy food on their way home that evening. Without that job, the likelihood of a family having little or nothing to eat was very high.

This landowner made several people happy that morning when he selected them to work in his vineyards. He offered to pay them the going rate for a day laborer, one denarius, and they accepted his offer.

At nine o'clock in the morning, the landowner returned to the marketplace to get more workers. No money was mentioned during this transaction, but the landowner assured the laborers he would do what was right. This was good enough for them, and they headed to his vineyards just as the earlier workers had done.

Surprisingly, the landowner returned to the marketplace again at noon, three o'clock and five o'clock, which was just one hour before the workday would conclude. Each time, he hired more workers and took them to his vineyards.

At the end of the work day, the landowner instructed his manager to pay the workers, beginning with those who arrived last. To everyone's surprise, each worker received the same amount of pay, regardless of how many hours they had worked.

As you would expect, those who had worked a partial day were elated, but those who had been chosen first and worked the longest were quite upset. They assumed they would be paid more because they had worked longer, and they voiced their disappointment.

"Those who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun," they blurted out to the landowner.

Immediately, the landowner replied, "Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give this one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have a right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Are you resentful because I am generous? So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last." (Matthew 20:12-16)

I think you can see why this parable created a buzz among the crowd that day. It had as many twists and turns as a mountain road, and to borrow a phrase from Al Gore in a Presidential Debate, "It sounded a lot like Fuzzy Math." Lots of people had to be shaking their heads as they listened to Jesus, especially those who owned businesses.

After all, this was no way to run a business. Paying people who worked one hour the same as those who work twelve would destroy morale, lower productivity and lead to a cash flow problem. What was Jesus thinking?

Well, what was Jesus thinking? What point was he making that day when he told this parable?

Participants in the kingdom of God live by a different value system than those who do not. We are our brothers' keeper and bear a responsibility to support and encourage one another. Each of us must do our part to build a just society, help people feel safe and make it possible for every person to be productive by using his or her gifts and talents. The welfare of everyone in the community is more important than personal riches, ambition, desires, rights, privileges and expectations.

Don't misunderstand me. This parable was not meant to undermine the importance of personal responsibility, ambition and hard work. It was not told to be critical of those who own businesses or make money. As a matter of fact, the one who comes across favorably in this parable is the landowner. He was merciful and generous, two of the most important traits needed by those who wish to build healthy communities.

There are two questions which must be asked when studying this parable. Why did the landowner keep returning to the marketplace that day to hire workers? Why did he instruct his manager to pay the workers beginning with those who worked the least amount of time? I believe the answers to these questions will lead us to the reason Jesus told this parable.

Why did the landowner keep returning to the marketplace that day to hire workers?

Perhaps it was late in September, and it was time to harvest the grapes. If so, there was no time to waste. The fall rains would soon arrive, and grapes left on the vines would spoil.

Even if this was true, I don't think the landowner's profit was his primary motivation. Look at the conversation he had at five o'clock with the unemployed workers back in the marketplace.

"About the eleventh hour, he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard' " (Matthew 20:6-7)

Why did the landowner send these men to his vineyard for just one hour? Could they really make that much difference in harvesting the grapes? I doubt it.

However, the landowner knew one hour of work could make a difference in their lives. Instead of going home with no food for the evening meal or breakfast the next morning, they would be able to provide for their families.

When the landowner returned to the marketplace at five o'clock, he knew why these laborers were still there. They were desperate and just a day's work from being hungry.

The landowner saw more than those men that day. He saw a wife and children anxiously looking for their husband and father at the end of the day to see if he was carrying any food in his hands along with his tools. Their disappointment if he was not carrying food was more than

this landowner could bear. So, he hired them, all of them, for one hour and mercifully paid them what they would need to provide for their families.

What was Jesus' point in this portion of the parable? Accumulating wealth in the kingdom of God is sinful when one's fortune is built upon the suffering of others, and hoarding resources is unacceptable when they could be shared with those who are living on the edge of extinction.

Those with means and influence must use both to help their neighbors climb out of poverty, even if it means throwing caution, common sense and sound business practices to the wind. Divine mercy will not allow any of us to rest on full stomachs while our neighbors toss and turn on empty ones. "In God's kingdom, the right thing often entails sacrifice," as my friend Tom Ehrich writes, "because you put people ahead of profits."

Let's move on to the second question this parable raises. **At the end of the day, why did the landowner pay those who worked the least number of hours first?** He had to know those who worked longer would be upset because everyone received the same pay.

Wouldn't it be smarter to pay those who worked the longest first and send them on their way? Chances are they would not have known everyone was paid an equal amount, and the landowner could have saved himself a lot of grief.

I am confident the landowner thought of this, which means he deliberately chose this method of payment. Why? It appears to me he wanted to teach all those who worked for him that day a lesson about what it means to be a good neighbor.

What was that lesson? Making sure there was food in every home each night, including theirs, was more important to him than having extra money in his pocket. Doing his part to build a safe and prosperous community meant being sensitive to others' needs and extravagantly generous. If he had to live with less so others could merely live, he would do it, and he did.

It is fairly obvious no one else in the parable felt this way, though. How do I know this?

What is missing in this parable on the part of the workers hired that morning? There was no expression of gratitude for being selected that day to work and no words of

appreciation for receiving enough money to buy food on their way home so their families would not go hungry.

There was no compassion, sympathy, joy, unselfishness or acknowledgement of the landowner's kind heart. Their eyes were focused squarely on themselves, and what they wanted. They neither saw, nor appeared to care, about anyone else.

I wonder if this had become true of the disciples who were following Jesus. Had they adopted a "what's in it for me" attitude and begun ignoring the needs of others? Did their values look more like those of the world than the values they were called to model as his disciples?

It appears they did, especially in light of the previous passage where Peter said to Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" (Matthew 19:27)

Peter sounded a lot like the early workers in this parable after the landowner had been so gracious to the late workers, and Jesus called him out on it. Jesus wanted Peter to know anyone who was insensitive, unmerciful, hard-hearted, ungrateful, selfish and stingy did not reflect the heart and nature of God and was not doing his or her part to build healthy, safe, prosperous communities. These were not the characteristics of someone who was his brother's keeper and a good neighbor.

I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon that Jesus enjoyed telling parables. This is evident by the number he told.

If he were here today and could share just one of his many parables, I wonder which one he would choose. If he looked into your heart and mine, and he examined our lifestyles, would it be this one?