

First of all, I want to affirm the value, again, of the Psalms of Lament, the ancient songs of Israelite worship that were honest about reality and suffering. Modern spiritual writers have no problem coming up with laments, songs of grief, for our time. Here is an excerpt from a recent UCC devotional. It is by Rachel Hackenberg, who reinterprets the beginning of Psalm 77 for our time: “In the morning, I sigh. At night, I complain to God as I fall asleep. My whole being refuses to be comforted... Maybe your vexation is the addition of online-at-home school, or the grief of losing hugs and get-togethers. Maybe your distress is the constant storm of racism, or the uncertainty of employment. Maybe it is all of the above. Maybe pacing and moaning are the best prayers your spirit can offer right now. So offer them. Without embarrassment. Without reserve. As long as the day, as deep as the night. Rage and moan and complain. Know that God hears. Hear my prayer O God; I complain because I remember your Goodness, and know that Comfort *will still come*.”

Oftentimes WE feel like the last and the least, with plenty to complain about. As Henri Nouwen commented about Jesus’ words at the beginning of Luke, WE are often the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed that Jesus said he was sent to. Make no mistake about it, the God and Christ of the Bible are on the side of everyone who is oppressed, weak, or poor. (Remember the Matthew 25 story about a final judgment, when Jesus said whenever we helped the “least” of these our brethren, we did it unto HIM.)

Our gospel parable or story this morning told of the laborers, who went to the market place, stood waiting with other temp workers (day laborers), but were not hired all day, and finally one vineyard owner hired them at about 5 o’clock! Then came a strange and unfair accounting. The vineyard owner paid a full days wages to all, starting with the ones hired last! If I were hired early in the morning, I think I too would be upset with this accounting! But Jesus is comparing this

to the Kingdom of Heaven! Jesus' point comes through quite clear... God's accounting is not like ours. God can be compassionate and generous beyond what most of us would do; Compassionate - to hire the day laborers who waited all day to get work. And Generous - to give them a full day's wages, that were needed every day just to put food on the table.

So nowadays a lot of US can indeed complain and moan about not finding employment. Just think of recent college grads, or people who have been laid off for months on end, who hear the words “it's not a good time to be hiring.” Also, everyone is weighing the risks and advantages of on-site working, versus working from home. As with the laborers in the marketplace, much unemployment these days is due to no fault of one's own. (Jesus' story was not about lazy workers, but workers who waited all day when no one was hiring.) If we apply the point of Jesus' story to our days, we need to recognize that in God's economics, things will not always seem logical or fair. Rather, in the Kingdom of Heaven, compassion and generosity are always important factors; the actions of the vineyard owner can also be called Grace. In the *These Days* devotional booklet, Kendra Smith, teacher at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, gives a beautiful interpretation of Grace in this story of the Laborers in the Vineyard: “The beauty of grace is that it can never be deserved or expected, for it is a gift... With grace, we need not be envious of what others receive. God's grace given to others never diminishes what we receive. For God's grace is more than enough for you and for me.” Her concluding prayer: “When life seems unfair, help us not to compare ourselves with others, but to simply delight in and give thanks for your grace, freely offered to all. Amen.”

These strange or unexpected economics of the Kingdom of Heaven do support the concept of figuring out a “living wage” for all our brothers and sisters, as well as unemployment income for those who are legitimately unable to work and need the help of society. We

know that the mentally ill, the physically sick, the elderly, anyone disabled in any way do need our respect and our help.

Thinking about Jesus story of the laborers in the vineyard, I can't help but think of black, brown, indigenous and immigrant peoples. Most countries, including our own, have always oppressed people in the work force. Many of our current immigrant laborers have extremely low wages and probably no health insurance if they get hurt on the job. The slave labor of blacks for hundreds of years cannot even be compared other injustices of “living wages.” Their wages literally involved remaining “living” and working toward freedom from their chains; the South literally prospered on their backs. I admit that I am mostly puzzled by the idea of “reparations.” How can anyone compensate or calculate a compensation for freedom taken away, for inhumane beatings and lynchings??? Maybe given Jesus' story this morning, we might consider, at the very least, what would have been a “living wage” at the time your grandfather or father was a slave? Or what was the average laborer yearly wage at that time, and multiply by years of being enslaved. It is a puzzlement, indeed, but some kind of reparation should be calculated. In Kingdom of Heaven economics, the owner generously gave the last hired a full day's living wage!

Back to our times...many people think the math was a little off in the recent stimulus package, adding \$600 per week to existing unemployment pay.... so that many could collect more money by not going back to work. No incentive to find a job! I know I need to leave the accounting to those more able who have studied statistics about jobs and wages. But I can re-iterate that Jesus talked plenty about money in his teachings and stories. And his story about the Laborers in the Vineyard is quite clear. The Vineyard owner was both compassionate and generous regarding wages, and the implication was that his followers are to be the same, as we are able.

I note that there are more and more organizations that are asking for donations in these tough times, from Music and Arts, to sports and philanthropic organizations. Yes, everyone is feeling the pinch. There are so many organizations that are in the position of those laborers in the marketplace, who were waiting and asking all day, but still not being hired, still hindered by a quarantine ambience and distancing regulations. And the appeals are appropriate: Those “who are able” please consider a donation to help this cause. There are still plenty of Vineyard owners who are indeed able to help organizations that are struggling, or feeling like they are the last or the least, through no fault of their own. We remember how Jesus concluded his parable, that “The Last will be first, and the first will be last.” Jesus’ economics are not the ways of this world; grace and generosity have the final say. Jesus reminds us that we cannot be envious or compare who receives what kind of grace in this world, but simply to be thankful for every bit of grace WE have received.

We can feel free to complain and moan with Psalm 77 about our current troubles or lack of comfort. But we also do well to remember the conclusion of the Psalm: “I will remember your great deeds, Lord, I will recall the wonders you did in the past, I will think about all that you have done.” Yes, “through many dangers, toils and snares we have already come; tis grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.” The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is all about Grace and Generosity in God’s will and God’s way. Grace and Generosity for ALL God’s children. Sometimes we are receivers, sometimes we are givers; and we know when we need to take on each role. The circumstances of every person are never equal, nor are different times of our lives. Sometimes we are in the position of last hired, and sometimes we are more like the Vineyard owner. Let’s help God create a more just and beloved community in this world, where ALL experience compassion, grace and generosity. Amen.