

Saint Giles Presbyterian Church
Sermon – Rev. Rebecca Kuiken
Sunday, September 20th, 2020

I saw them at the side of Home Depot in San Jose most mornings. About a dozen Latino men, short, dark haired, chestnut skin in their 20s and 30s who waited patiently to be picked up as day laborers. Trucks and vans dropped by and they scrambled in. They probably found themselves digging a ditch or hauling mulch in a backyard. They were disposable workers and their labor conditions were precarious and harsh. Most worked hourly at minimum wage. I heard stories that sometime worker completed the work but were stiffed at the end of the day.

I thought of these men when reading Jesus' parable. Matthew 20 has often been called 'the parable of the workers.' Kenneth Bailey, author of "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes" suggests that we might better think of it as the "parable of the compassionate employer."

It turns out that the Middle East has a thousand-year custom that resembles the situation of the Latino day workers. And it survives to this day. If you go north of the Damascus Gate in East Jerusalem, unemployed Palestinians gather each morning at a designated location on a major road. Employers, usually Israelis, pull up in vans. As they arrive, five to ten young men rush into the street to see how many this employer wants, hoping to be selected. It is, we think, a humiliating practice both for these Palestinian men and for the Latino men of San Jose.

The employer in Jesus' parable undoubtedly begins his day knowing the exact number of workers he requires. Yet it seems puzzling that he keeps checking over the course of the day. By noon most men would have found work or be discouraged enough to return home. This employer seems both dismayed and amazed to see men still standing, eager and hopeful to find work. And perhaps he rewards their raw courage.

While the first ones hired negotiated a day's wage, one denarii, when the second round of men are hired, the employer simply says. "What is just I will pay you." We thus know that the employer is trusted and respected enough in the community and these men that they accept his terms. We also know they've been spared further public humiliation in waiting to be hired and now will be able to feed the families.

Each time we see a group of men hired, the question is raised, "What is justice?" What is justice for an unemployed person who is doing everything in his power to find a job? What is justice for those at the Damascus Gate or at America's Home Depots who stand

publicly all day long and endure the humiliating or pitying glances of those who are economically secure?

At the day's end, the master finds a few laborers standing but unhired. When asked why they are still there, the unemployed have a simple reply: "No one has hired us!" They are willing and able to work, and still have not given up hope. At this point the employer could simply say, "Hey, here's a denarius each. Go and buy food." He hires them instead. The employer demonstrates time and time again sensitivity and compassion for the unemployed: he cares for their physical needs as well as their need for dignity.

At the end of the day, the employer surprises the listener by ordering that the workers will be paid in reverse order to being hired. In doing so, he seems to intentionally cause unnecessary trouble. By paying the laborers in reverse order, the people who have worked the entire day get to witness the grace that he extends to all the others. First the one-hour workers, then the 3-hour workers and the six-hour workers – all receive the exact same pay as those who had worked all day. The tension simply mounts. We can hear in ourselves the childhood cry "but it's not fair"! The climax comes when the first laborers discover that they receive only what they were promised, but no more!

No one is *underpaid* in this parable. The "first" are paid exactly what they negotiated. The justly paid complain and here is why: they cannot tolerate grace! It's the same old story we heard in the Prodigal Son parable where the elder son goes sulking once the younger son is celebrated. Grace is not just amazing; it is also absolutely infuriating! It uses a different calculus for the worth of a human being. People are not simply valued in market-oriented terms but given worth as creations in the image of God.

The master addresses the angry workers' spokesman.

"You have nothing to complain about. Justice is served. I gave you what I agreed upon and you can do what you like with it. Now I'm free to also do with the money that is mine. I choose to pay these men a living wage. You can now go home to your wives and children; proudly say you found work and have a full day's pain. I want these other men to also be able to walk in the door of their houses, with the same joy in their hearts and money in their pockets."

This is what compassion looks like. It builds a network of caring. It comes when we hold onto the least and last, and not just the first and foremost. The economy of God looks very different than our economy. Years back, my Harvard professor Sharon Parks noted that, "The university lecturer compares him/herself to the assistant professor who compares himself to the tenured professor who compares herself to the university

president. None, however, compare themselves to the kitchen worker, custodian or the immigrant worker." I've thought of this over and over again, as I've compared my wealth, success or standing and frequently found it wanting. There will always be a family member with a larger stock portfolio. And, of course, we all have Jeff Bezos of Amazon.

In her "Charter of Compassion," the scholar Karen Armstrong says:

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

How do we "dethrone ourselves from the center of our world"? What helps us to become compassionate?

My friend Rev. Douglas Huneke wrote a book called "The Moses of Rovno" that tells the story of Fritz Graebe, a German engineer who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. The book asks, "What enabled Graebe and other rescuers to do what they did?" One distinguishing trait was that they had cultivated an empathic imagination. They had the ability to place themselves in the actual situation or role of another person and to imagine the effect and consequences on them.

Graebe, like many rescuers, had one strong moral model. For him, it was his mother. He remembers a practice of his mother's that developed his empathic imagination. Early in his life, regularly and in many different situations, Louise Graebe would ask her son, "And Fritz, what would you do?" It was never an idle, rhetorical question. She would visit a relative in prison, despite her family's intense pressure. When Fritz asked why she persisted, her response echoed the same refrain, "And Fritz, what would you do?" She held consistent, resolute views on right and wrong. She both articulated and practiced her beliefs and values. She directed Fritz to make difficult decisions that would cause life to be better or easier for someone else.

Friends, God's compassion is more extravagant than we can sometimes tolerate. We seek to be rewarded for our productivity, our intelligence, our financial prowess and even our acts of goodness. God turns these calculations upside down and turns our hearts and mind toward human need and human vulnerability.

Let us live into God's compassionate dream for ourselves and our world.