“What’s coming to me”

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Matthew 20:1-16

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***20“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6And 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?’ 7They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8When 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.’ 9When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, ‘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.’ 13But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”***

Yesterday, Dr. William Yoo, the author of *What Kind of Christianity? Anti-Black Racism and Slavery in the Presbyterian Church*, came to Berkeley to give a talk and participate in a Q&A for the Presbytery of San Francisco. Earlier this year many of us participated in a study of this book in a seven-week class taught by Rev. Kamal Hassan of Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church in Richmond. Having experienced the gut-punch that is this book, I was looking forward to hearing the author speak. His research, his scholarship, his perfect nuance of words were impressive. The man himself – a second generation Korean American from New York, PCUSA pastor, historian, professor at Columbia seminary, six-foot two, trim, gentle and generous conversationalist – seems an unusual author for a scholarly study of anti-black racism and slavery. Our questions and comments were deep and dark, but even just at a minimum our comments and questions revolved around the indefensible unfairness, unimaginable cruelty, and inequality that seemed to be such basic assumptions of society, that bolstered the system of slavery despite the horrors of treating human beings as a commodity.

How was this fair? How was this right? Where is equality in this? Who deserved that kind of treatment?

Going beyond slavery, we know that blacks were not the only people discriminated against (an understatement in the context of the institution of slavery). In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. Waves of immigrants worked around that by coming into Canada and making their way south. One such immigrant, Jeu Gong Lum, made his way to Mississippi. He married a Chinese woman who had been brought over as an indentured servant as a child, who was acclimated to the southern life, interacted with white women at church events, cooking southern food, and read and wrote English perfectly. When they married they set up a small grocery store, which was a common way for Chinese immigrants to get around the exclusionary laws because they could be classified as “merchants” and avoid some of the stringent rules. Eventually they had two daughters who attended schools for white children. The family moved to a new town, Rosedale, Mississippi. In 1924, 30 years *before* Brown vs. Board of Education, the two girls showed up to their first day of school, only to be told to leave, because in Rosedale they were considered colored, and would have to go to the school for black children. The family brought a case against the local school district making the argument that “it was discriminatory to force Asian students to attend a school in which “colored” otherwise meant black.” They won their case at the local level with an attorney who was very diligent, but lost at the State level. By the time it got to the U.S. Supreme Court it had been assigned to a different attorney who was not as invested in a positive outcome so they lost. That loss at the U.S. Supreme Court became precedent setting in that it ended up *furthering* segregation and broadening its powers, the opposite of the intention of the original complaint.1

The case of the Lum family is one in which one discrimination is piled on top of another system of discrimination. The Lum family had two choices – the white school or the black school. In their lawsuit a fair judgement might have been to allow the girls to attend school for white children. But how do we decide what is fair, when we only have two choices – those two choices are themselves a product of an earlier unfair choice. *Nothing is fair when the whole premise is irrational.*

Slavery in the United States, and the treatment of Chinese (and later, Japanese) are but two examples of societal attempts to decide what is fair; what is deserved; what one is entitled to and another is not. Both of these examples have had far reaching consequences and implications that continue today.

Our television media even took notice of the search for fairness, the claims of entitlement, and deservability. In 1965, the special “A Charlie Brown Christmas” aired for the first time. “A Charlie Brown Christmas” follows the life of Charlie Brown as he complains that Christmas has become too commercial. So it was ironic when in 2009, ABC aired the special without certain scenes – in order to make more room for commercials! Here is one scene that was cut (video2).

(If no video: One scene that was cut, was the scene in which Sally asks Charlie Brown to write out her Christmas list to Santa, while she dictates the letter. She composes a very polite letter, lists many, many, many items, ending with the dictum, “If that’s too complicated, feel free to send money.” To which Charlie Brown runs off with “Oh, even my baby sister!” Sally seems confused and explains, “All I want is what I have coming to me! I just want my fair share!”)

Slavery, anti-black racism, a binary choice when a third category comes along, are each but some of the ways this country, and others and humans in general, are set up to fail when we try to incorporate equality, equity and fairness into places that are foundationally wrong.

The laborers who worked in the field as described in our text for today, thought they had fairness all worked out. They knew who was worth more and why. I’ve been here all day, put in more hours, therefore I am entitled to more money. All I want is what I have coming to me. I just want my fair share. They were promised the usual daily wage.

Those who came to work in the afternoon, were promised pay “that was right.” And there was no mention of *any* pay to those that were hired even later. Those that came to work in the afternoon and those that came even later, wouldn’t have had any idea “what I have coming to me” or any idea about what “my fair share” would be. Their expectations would have been vague, but those that came in the morning expected the usual daily wage.

So when all of the workers received the usual daily wage, the only ones up in arms were the ones who actually wanted *more* than they were promised – because after everyone was paid they could then compare their pay to others and want a do-over! “Hey! You tricked me!” they might say. But the vineyard owner had not gone back on his word, had given them exactly what he promised them. So what’s the problem?

The interesting thing about this parable is that if the vineyard manager had paid those who had come first, first, those workers would have gone away happy. They never would have known about the extravagance of the vineyard owner. But the added emphasis of this parable is that by paying the later workers first, the all day workers had to actually stand there and watch the payment system play out. They had to have that feeling, experience that moment, when it dawns on them what is happening – the vineyard owner is actually paying everyone the same amount!

When someone is generous on our behalf, we are happy, grateful, relieved. But when someone is generous to folks around us and not us, we feel left out. It wasn’t the pay that the all day workers were complaining about. It was the *extra that they didn’t get*, that they were complaining about. The vineyard owner could have avoided the grumbling of the all day workers if he wanted, but that wouldn’t have been a teachable moment.

This parable isn’t just a lesson about fairness or equality for equality’s sake, it’s a lesson about letting God be God. Just as other parables have taught us that only God can *judge*, this parable teaches us that by the same token, only God can *bless*. God’s grace is for God to give wherever and whenever, without consulting us. We don’t get to decide where God’s generosity lands and how far it reaches.

Our work is to remember that we are stuck in a world that is not yet fully the kingdom of God. This world where our decisions about what is fair, what is owed, what we are obliged to do, fall so far short so many times throughout our history. Our work is to participate in God’s plan to bring about that kingdom whenever we can. We can’t afford to be ambivalent. If we get a chance to be the kingdom of God for another, we need to do it. I invite us to be on the lookout this week for opportunities to make God’s grace visible to another.

We can’t wait.

Let’s pray…

<https://time.com/4533476/lum-v-rice-water-tossing-boulders/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Jk7KVDPdyc>