



## September 21, 2014: Pentecost St Hilda's, Sechart

### Matthew 20:1-16

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

---

I want you to think for a moment about something that you believe you're right about. It could be a position you hold on a political matter, an issue in a relationship, or a matter of principle. On what point of argument, in what relationship, on what issue within our society are you right? Think for a minute about this and settle on it, see it, taste it, feel it, touch it. What is the place where you are right and how does it feel to be there?

Like our own world, Jesus' world had many places where people felt they were right. It was, after all, a place governed by the strict right and wrong delineations of the laws and practices

of Rome. It was also a place where religion has its carefully laid out systems of how to stay in right relationship to God. But more importantly and more relevant to those who would be listening to this parable, it was a place where basic common sense would tell us what is right: those who work the longest and hardest, those most deserving, are always supposed to get more than those who work fewer hours under less strenuous conditions.

So, some background to the parable: In Jesus' day, it was common for day laborers to stand at the city gates and marketplaces, looking for a day's work and a day's wage. Sometimes people would hire a laborer for a day and then refuse to pay that person until later, a practice that had drastic implications for the poor who lived day to day. Therefore, Jewish law (see Leviticus 19:13) actually forbade the practice. This day labour situation, this Jewish law meant to protect the poor from wage abuse, and a common sense approach to who should be paid more than whom: all these things, is a set up for Jesus as he once again tells the people a parable of the kingdom, a homespun tale through which we get to glimpse something of the nature of God.

In this tale, of course, a landowner goes out in the morning looking for day laborers who will work in his vineyard. As the story goes, he first hires a group of labourers in the early morning and then returns a number of times and hires one group after another to work in his vineyard. The group hired first, he strikes a bargain with on the exact nature of their pay—he will pay them, he says, the usual daily wage. When he speaks to the other groups he tells them that he will pay them what is “right,” all except for those who come at the very last, the ones unable to find work earlier in the day. To these, he simply says “you also go into the vineyard.”

At the end of day when the laborers are to be paid, the landowner tells his manager to pay all the workers the same wage, but to start with those who came to the work last and, therefore, worked the least and worked under the most forgiving conditions. This activates the grumbling of those who worked the longest which then leads to the landowner's response. “Friend,” he says to them, “I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

And so in this parable the glimpse we get of God is this: God is generous beyond our own sense of what is right to do in a given situation. God's irrational and unbridled generosity flows out upon us when we have judged that we are deserving and upon those we have judged to be undeserving. God does this simply because this is who God is, the one from whom generosity flows like rain upon the just and the unjust, beams like the sun shining both on the righteous and the unrighteous.

And so this view of God is very challenging to us as we live our lives making judgments about what is right and what is not, who is worthy of our generosity and who is not, as we make these judgments day after day after day. And in many ways we must do this to live our lives, we must have some sort of place to start, about who and what we value and who and what we don't. But know that God is always standing at the edge of our sense of what is right and is plying us with doubt that we see and know the whole picture. God is standing at

the edge enticing us with the love, however small we have in our hearts for others, for the beautiful and beleaguered world we live in, God is standing at the edge, the generous owner of all lands, the generous creator of all people, the generous witness in every situation, the generous heart that beats in every conflict. God is standing at the edge with greater understanding and with blessing, always with blessing.

And so we must listen to the doubt or our own reckonings, the love that is already there in our hearts. We must listen to them for they are in all likelihood the place where God's own irrational and unbridled generosity will flow in, like rain does on the just and the unjust, like sun beams down on the righteous and the unrighteous.

And so to return to my first request of you: where are you convinced that you live in the place that is right? What does it mean that even in this situation God is more generous than you can imagine, pouring out blessing both on you and on the person or onto the situation you believe you have figured out. What doubt do you have in your situation? What bit of love do you have within you that may be the place into which God's own generosity can flow?

Poet Yehuda Amichai who many consider to be Israel's greatest modern poet was born in Germany in 1924. He left Germany at age twelve with his family and journeyed to Palestine. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war he fought with the Israeli defense forces. It was during the war that he became interested in poetry, eventually studying at Hebrew University and teaching both in Israel and the US. The rigors and horrors of his time in the war and in World War II, inform his poetry. In this poem, Amichai describes the limitations of a world in which we are right and what happens when doubt or love arrive.

### **The Place Where We Are Right by Yehuda Amichai**

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the Spring.

The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plough.

And a whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined  
house once stood.