

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

Pentecost 17

9.20.26

Maybe you've had the experience, in school or working life, where you were assigned a project with another person, and you ended up doing most of the work. Your partner was AWOL, but then at the end they shared credit for the final project.

Or maybe you were an oldest kid like me, and saw your later-to-arrive siblings get easier chores and looser rules, while still getting the same benefits of birthday presents and allowances that you got. It's just not fair, right?

It's easy to sympathize with the workers who grumble to the landowner in our Gospel reading. "These last worked only for one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." It's easy to understand. It just doesn't seem fair to give the same pay, the same credit, to workers who spent so much less time in the vineyard.

Imagine. The early workers are out there, picking the grapes, hauling the baskets. They are happy to be hired and eagerly doing their job in the morning hours. As the day goes on, as they are getting hot and tired, they see new recruits show up. Good, they may think, some help! There is certainly plenty to do.

Then the laborers line up for their pay. They see the latecomers getting the daily wage, and get their hopes up that they will receive more. But they are disappointed and insulted. Not only are they made to stand in line longer, but their work has been judged to be no better than that of the latecomers! Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Says the landowner.

The landowner apparently has a different economy in mind in hiring and paying his laborers. It is apparently not based on dollars per hour.

Now the usual daily wage is not something the workers are going to get rich on. It is about what it sounds like, an amount that you could use to feed your family for a day. And this little fact gives us a clue into how the landowner is thinking, and how the laborers are thinking. Especially those last hired.

At about 5:00 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.

Because no one has hired us. Anyone who has been unemployed for some period of time, or who has not been chosen for a position, can understand what this feels like. These folks were also standing around in the heat all day, waiting and stewing in worry. Will I be able to feed my family today? What do I do if I can't? Why aren't they choosing me? Am I too old, too young, too brown, is it my gender, my accent? Doesn't anyone see my gifts? Doesn't anyone want me?

What a relief it must have been to be sent to the vineyard, even late in the day. These workers may have hustled extra hard, feeling gratitude. But they probably also had some nervous energy, some lingering anxiety. What fraction of the daily wage are they going to give me? What will I be able to buy with it? I can skip food for a day, but how about my children?

This is a familiar scenario in our economy today, with gig workers, adjunct professors, part time and per diem folks out there hustling as hard as possible and hoping that they get enough to get by. Hoping that they can be chosen often enough to make a living for themselves and their families. Both sets of laborers, the early ones and the late ones, likely expect the wages to work in the same way as we would expect them to work. But the landowner surprises them, and all of us.

He surprises the workers in two ways. He gives them all the same pay, the usual daily wage. And he gives that pay to the latest workers first.

Why does the owner pay the last ones first? Maybe to teach a lesson to the first, a lesson they wouldn't get if they went home with their wages and didn't see what the later ones got.

But maybe there's another reason too. The later hires get paid first, and so get immediate relief from their worry about whether they will be able to feed their family that night. They aren't made to stand fretting in the line, wondering what dregs they will get after the first ones are paid.

This is a radically different economy from what we are used to. An economy in which everyone is paid just what they need. Where there is plenty of work for anyone willing. An economy where the most vulnerable are treated with extra care.

Our worldly economy, our human economy, tells us we should get more for working longer, that we should put aside extra just for ourselves. These feelings go way back. In our first story today, the people of Israel are given bread in the wilderness, manna. They are told to eat their share, every day, to not save it up. But later in the story some of them decide to put manna aside anyway, a little extra for them, just in case. The bread becomes moldy, and God says to them, I told you not to do that! The prayer Jesus taught us is a practice against this natural human impulse to store up or hoard. Give us today our daily bread, we pray. Not, give us lots of bread, so we can surround ourselves with wealth and security. Just give us enough, for today. The usual daily wage.

Our human economy tells us to get extra for ourselves. God's economy says, take just enough. You will be given what you need.

Our human economy says that when we are not chosen we are failing and should feel ashamed. God's economy says that we are all equally and infinitely valued.

God's economy shows special concern for the most vulnerable, for those our human economy would pick last.

This is the kingdom of heaven.

This is God's economy.

St Martin's, hear God's voice calling to you. You also go into the vineyard. Never mind when you got there or what the person next to you is being paid. Know that there is plenty of work and plenty of wages for all. Remember what it felt like when you were waiting to be called. Look out for the person coming in after you. Welcome them.

You also go into the vineyard. Eat your daily bread. Share the rest. Help to change the rules. Let God's kingdom come. Amen.