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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA  
September 20, 2020  
Year A, Proper 20, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2  
[Jonah 3:10-4:11](#)  
[Psalm 145:1-8](#)  
[Philippians 1:21-30](#)  
[Matthew 20:1-16](#)

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It's really almost too close to home, isn't it, this parable?

Some Bible stories feel far removed from the twenty-first century and we have to do a lot of work to bridge the cultural gap between the world of scripture and the world of today. But it doesn't take much imagination for this one. Living in Sonoma County makes it almost too easy. Here it is, harvest season, with workers literally going into vineyards around us each day. Many of them are immigrants, sometimes here for months at a time on guest-worker programs. But there are also those who work as day laborers, maybe through formal day labor centers like the ones in Graton or Healdsburg or Fulton, or maybe just by congregating outside a gas station or hardware store.

It's been said that the United States has been moving more and more toward what experts call an "hourglass society": divided into growing groups of the very rich and the very poor, with the middle class steadily shrinking away. Today we heard a story straight out of the hourglass: a rich boss with money to spend however he wants to, and a group of poor day laborers whose families are depending on their ability to get chosen to work today.

Of course there are some special considerations this year. Earlier this week I met a young woman; let's call her Alicia. She'd reached out to the church because her cell phone and Internet bills were overdue and about to be cut off. Her kids depended on the Internet for remote school. She told me she'd loved her job as an in-home caregiver until it disappeared at the start of the shutdown. She told me about applying for assistance program after assistance program, getting some help here and there, but more often getting mired in endless bureaucracies, delays, and denials. I was able to help her with a little contribution toward her bills that will hopefully delay the cutoff, but it was a drop in the bucket of what she needs. She was teary and exhausted. She said she couldn't afford to do her laundry. She said he wished she could still go to work.

Now of course back at the end of July the weekly federal unemployment assistance benefit expired. Our leaders have been unable to agree on a replacement and the plan to do so has basically been shelved. I told Alicia I was angry on her behalf. I'm angry that some of our leaders talk about not wanting to help poor workers because they're afraid of creating a disincentive to work—at a time when there simply is no work for many and many shouldn't be working anyway in a time of pandemic. I'm angry even while I benefit from the fact that professional-class people like me and my spouse are able to carry on doing our work safely at a distance from our homes, while working-class people's jobs are either done with more risk than ever, like store clerks and day laborers, or shut down altogether, like Alicia's. "Why are you standing idle?" the landowner said to the workers. "Because no one has hired us," they said.

I don't know if our gospel story quite fits neatly into any one political or economic perspective. On the one hand, center-right capitalists might find some things to like in this story: we have a wealthy landowner whose right to do what he wants with his money goes unchallenged: "Do I not have the right to do what I choose with what is mine?" And there's a seeming emphasis on the dignity of work: the landowner doesn't simply hand out cash, he creates job opportunities. But on the other hand, this is one socially conscious rich man. "What he chooses with what is his" ends up being to create a full-employment program for his village. And not only an employment program, but a social safety-net program that makes sure at the end of the day everyone goes home with a living wage.

Now the workers who worked all day are angry. And with good reason. The landowner kept his contract with them, but he gave the others a better deal. It's not fair.

Maybe you've read about the research studies where capuchin monkeys were given a piece of cucumber for completing a task. And capuchin monkeys like cucumbers pretty well. But they like grapes better. So when the monkeys just got the cucumber, everything was fine. But when they saw another monkey getting a grape as a reward instead, something happened. The cucumber monkeys started to go on strike. Sometimes they even threw the cucumber back at the researcher.<sup>1</sup>

We can imagine playing out this parable into the future and wondering what will happen tomorrow, or next week, or next year. Maybe the workers would start hiding out until later in the day to avoid getting chosen too early. The parable isn't trying to outline a perfect economic system we can implement in this world—although I think it has a lot to say about the injustices of our current one. But the parable is trying to tell us something about how God's economy works.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Bergman, "Monkeys for equal pay—and every cat for itself," in *Berkeley News* (UC Berkeley, March 11, 2015), <https://news.berkeley.edu/2015/03/11/frans-de-waal-greater-good/>.

In a human economy, people get treated as means to an end. In God people are ends in themselves and making sure everyone has enough is the priority. In a human economy we care a lot about fairness. Fairness is what happens when you and I are both in competition for a limited set of resources. In God's economy there is always enough to go around, and God is interested not in fairness, but in grace.

Think of the story of God showering manna on the Israelites to feed them while they're wandering in the desert, where there's always enough manna for everyone, every single day. People can't hoard the manna up—it goes bad after a day—but God provides more each day, just in time, just as much as the people need. Think of the heavenly banquet, that image that keeps repeating itself over and over throughout Scripture, where the prophets talk about bread and milk and wine for all comers and without price. Think of Jesus feeding the five thousand on the grass, with twelve full baskets brimming with the leftovers. Think of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus changes water into so much wine an entire party can't finish it.

God's economy is about grace: showering favors on those who have done nothing to earn them. It's God's answer to our human cycle of scarcity and violence. And it's grounded in the biggest act of generosity of all: God giving God's own self away out of love for you and me. Jesus is the embodiment of self-giving. He doesn't hold onto the glory and privilege of being the Son of God: he makes his whole life a gift to the deserving and undeserving alike.

From the world of scripture to the world of today: from first-century Judea to twenty-first-century Sonoma County: God's grace is the same, and God's priorities are the same. How will we allow ourselves to be swept up in that economy of grace here and now, in this pandemic season, this wildfire season, this election season? How will we let go of fairness based on fear, and live in a world instead where people are the priority, and there is enough so none ever have to go without?