

# The Upside Down Kingdom: God's New Math

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September 21, 2014

## Matthew 20:1-16

As many of you know, it is now crush time in the local vineyards... perhaps the busiest time of year with many folks working 24/7 to get in those grapes. I was talking to John Balleto of Balleto winery over off Occidental road and he was telling me how busy he was. Needed workers wherever he could find them. On one particularly busy day, he went over the Graton labor center early in the morning and hired several guys to work that day. By mid-day he realized he needed more people, so he went back and hired some more. Then about 5:00 in afternoon had to go back and find more. That time of day, he knew he was hiring guys who were probably not that enthusiastic about work, but he really needed the extra help. By the end of the day, the harvest was complete. John was so thankful to get all the work done that when the time came to pay his part time workers, he decided to pay everyone the same. Guys who worked one hour got the same as guys who worked in hot sun all day. "John, I can't believe you did that? What did the guys who worked all day think of that?" "Well, Gene", he said as we sipped a fine Pinot, "They weren't too happy. They grumbled. They seemed to think it was unfair." Duh!!

(At this point, the scripture lesson, Matthew 20: 1-16, was read)

Before becoming a United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon spent many years as the chaplain of Duke University. He shares this story from those years: "I remember once when I preached on this Matthew text in the university chapel. At the end of the service a student came up to me and asked, 'Where do you get these stories that you use in your talks on Sundays?' 'Growing up in South Carolina, I guess,' I responded.

" 'Well, she continued, 'I was really bothered by the story you told this morning. I just don't think that's the way to treat people. It was wrong to pay the people who worked only one hour as much as those who worked all day.'

" 'Wait a minute, I responded, 'That story is not original with me. That's from Matthew, Chapter 20.'

" 'Matthew?' she asked.

" 'Yes, Matthew, a book in the Bible,' I explained.

" 'I see', she said, 'but that still doesn't make it right.'

" 'What is your church background?' I asked, praying that she wouldn't say Methodist.

" 'I don't really have a church background,' she answered, 'but my parents did take me to church a couple of times when I was a kid.'

" 'I envy you,' I said. 'I just preached a sermon on the laborers in the field and several hundred people have come out of this chapel and told me they liked what I had to say. You, on the other hand, tell me that you found the parable offensive, unjust, bothersome. Well, for your information, the man who told that story was later crucified for telling stories like that.'

Willimon concludes, "Sometimes those of us who deal with these holy mysteries so often, find that the mystery dissipates and we are no longer impressed by the oddness of the God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ." Have you ever thought of God as odd?

Just when we think we have God under control, when we have created a comfortable and predictable God in our image, look what happens. Jesus tells a story about the nature of God's Kingdom and everything blows up. Reflecting on this text, one New Testament scholar says, "This story Jesus tells about the kingdom of heaven is counter to our expectations of the way the world works. We want the world to be fair because we want to receive good for the good we have done. If we work an hour, we ought to get paid for an hour. We want the world to be predictable, that is, we want the world to be unsurprising so that we can better control our lives and have some say in our destiny." But then Jesus tells a story about a very surprising God. The truth about God, according to this parable, is that God does not act as we might expect; the truth about God, according to this parable, is that God surprises us by not being the God we thought we had. God might not even be bound by the standards of what we would call "fair" and "unfair."

Our older daughter, majored in math, even for a number of years taught high school math, which is a complete mystery to me since I was never all that good in math. Although, there was this girl named Betty, who once shared her math book with me. But I struggled with algebra, struggled with geometry, struggled with physics. I'm sure this information is not all that comforting to our church budget committee! If you were ask me, "What led you into the ministry," I could answer, "Well, you see, there was this high school math teacher named Miss Snell. She loved math, taught advanced algebra, and truly believed she had the skill to teach a rock how to solve complex fractions. But she mostly failed with me. So I decided to pick a vocation which would require of me the absolute minimum of math skills!" I am only half kidding. So imagine my dismay when I open a gospel, start reading, and

discover it has its own kind of mathematics, but a very special kind of math, an upside down kind of math, what we might call God's new math.

I think of the shepherd, praised by Jesus, who leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness to go off and find the one that is lost. And he rejoices when he finds it. But what happens when he brings the one back, only to find that most of the 99 have wandered off or been eaten by wild beasts? Jesus doesn't seem to worry about that. He is only concerned about finding the one that was lost.

How about the woman who took nearly a quart of fine perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet. On his feet! Bought any fine perfume lately? You know how much even a tiny bottle costs. What would you pay for a quart? Yet she wastefully pours a small fortune in perfume on his feet and he praises her. What kind of mathematics is that? Jesus seemingly couldn't care less about the cost.

And then there is today's story which is just plain crazy. People are hired by a farmer at various times of the day to work in his field. At the end of the day this eccentric farmer brings his workers together and pays everyone the same wage. And, here's a surprise, there is grumbling. Who wouldn't grumble? I work a day, he works an hour, and our pay is the same? That's no way to run a business; and that's no way to treat your labor force! It's not fair! I suspect most of us can quickly and easily identify with the workers who worked all day in the hot sun. I would grumble too.

You see a common theme here? We learned in school that one plus one equals two. It never changes... one plus one equals two. But in the Kingdom of God, one may be equal in value to 99; the cost of spilled perfume is irrelevant, and one hour of work may be valued as much as eight hours of work. Says Willimon, "Most of us are unaccustomed to such math. We think to ourselves, 'As far as God is concerned, if I do this, then I will get that. But what if our relationship with God is not a matter of what we do or the way we figure it, but a matter of what God does and the way God figures it. It does seem that, built right into the heart of the Gospel, is a kind of effusiveness, a sort of extravagance, which refuses to be calculated, and can often be quite exasperating. We say we want to live in a world where if we do this we will get that. One plus one equals two. And yet, it appears that God has created the world in such a way that there is room for God to be gracious. There is room for people who have nothing to be given everything. There is space available for those whose lives don't add up to much of anything to have everything."

Educator, John Westerhoff, tells us of being called in to consult about problems encountered by government teachers at a western school for Native Americans. One of the teachers confided to him that she was shocked at the lack of morals among the children. "They cheat constantly," she told him. "We can't make them stop."

So he interviewed the children and asked them why they all looked on each other's papers during tests. They told him, "If someone in the tribe knows, he should tell everyone who doesn't know. If someone in the tribe doesn't know, he should go and ask someone who knows."

Westerhoff realized that he was in a culture with a very different orientation than his own. What he had been taught to call cheating, they called cooperation. Is one cultural view more healthy than the other? I suppose it all depends on how you look at it.

And so it is that, with parables such as the one we heard today, Jesus calls us to look at the world with different eyes, with different standards of judgment than those that operate in the world. The one who works one hour gets paid the same as the one who works eight? Ridiculous!

Or could Jesus be telling us that at the heart of our relationship to God is God's extravagant graciousness. God doesn't keep score, doesn't even own a scorecard. And if that is true of God, perhaps it is also true of God's universe, indeed of each of us. Perhaps graciousness is built into the very fabric of the universe. Is the world really a place of constant struggle and injustice and sadness? Or is the world a place where grace, even undeserved grace, abounds? Much depends on the creator and the creation. Who is God and who are we as God's creatures? Perhaps we are created to be gracious toward each other, people who, through our own graciousness, awaken graciousness in others. Dare we be as extravagant, effusive, even reckless, with our love as God, even when it runs counter to all we have been taught to believe?

In the words of UCC pastor, Tony Robinson, "When our only measure is fairness, when our preoccupation is our just desserts, we lose touch with a sense of grace and graciousness. We forget about the people who love us more than we deserve, and the God who has extended generosity and forgiveness to us. Many have commented in recent years about the hard edge of anger building up in our society. Could it be that when life is reduced to you-get-what-you-deserve, and to economic values alone, hearts contract and kindness dries up? Perhaps knowing ourselves as receivers of astonishing mercy is what opens our hearts and our hands to others."

If you are at all like me, you like to think that you are pretty self-sufficient, earning your way, getting what you deserve, taking care of yourself. Or could it be, as the parable suggests, that we have been blessed and forgiven and loved far beyond what we have any right or reason to expect? Hmm... we may have much more in common with those last hour workers that we really care to admit.