

Keep the Change, Share the Change

A Sermon on Matthew 20:1-16—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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Sometimes different people can interpret the same thing in different ways. Movies frequently get panned by some critics while others applaud them as a cinematic masterpiece. In recent years, a pair of glasses and a pineapple left behind in museums have been interpreted as pieces of modern art, with the pineapple even getting a protective glass case put over it.

In today's reading, a parable story of Jesus, two groups of workers get the same thing, a coin, and interpret it as grace on the one hand and as unfairness on the other. The good news comes in how the giver of the coins helps the workers and us reform our interpretation of the coins and what it points to in our relationship with God.

Now before we jump fully into the two initial experiences of the coin, let me first admit that even the story that Jesus tells can be viewed differently from our English language point of view. And that's because different Bible scholars see the same Greek word yet use different words to translate them at times. We have the Reformers to thank for the opportunity of translators to make such difficult decisions about Hebrew and Greek words, for it was the Reformers who finally broke through the old idea that the Bibles should be read in a dead language, Latin, and made room for the Bible to be translated into the living languages of everyday people. So for instance, near the end of the story the owner asks whole day workers if their "Ophthalmos sou poneeros"—which literally means is your eye evil? So some translate it that way but others say are you jealous? Which helps interpret the word a little more.

There are other phrases in today's story that are interpreted slightly differently, and one has to do with time and the other with money.

Today we use precise time calculations that are based on noon as the middle of the day and midnight as the end and beginning. But back then time was calculated by sundown and daybreak. A new day started at sunset and the hours were kept by how long it had been since the sun came up, which as a baseline was around what we call 6 a.m. So it is that the literal translation of time in the parable 'around the third hour' refers to what we call 9 a.m., the sixth hour is noon, the ninth hour is 3 p.m., and the eleventh hour is 5 p.m., and then they end work at 6 p.m. The King James Version keeps the more literal third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh-hour, and this is where that phrase meaning "last-chance" comes from, from the workers who squeezed some work in at the very last possible opportunity. But we don't talk that way anymore.

The money translation is even more central to our interpretation of the story. The word for what the vineyard owner gives all the workers is the Greek denarius. Some translators see that and call it a penny, some see it and call it a usual day's wage, while still others just keep the word denarius. And they're all right in a way. Denarius is literal, penny is right in that the British currency that eventually replaced the denarius coin was the penny, and the usual day's wage is right in that in Jesus' day, a denarius is about what a worker could expect for a day's work. It's not over the top pay, but it's not too shabby either. What we might call a living wage. None of the translations can tell the whole story about the pay. A denarius doesn't tell you what it might be worth, and a usual day's wage doesn't tell you that the owner was probably placing a single coin into the hand of each of the workers.

You see, I would have liked it if Jesus had told the story with an extra detail. The story as it stands is controversial in that the twelve-hour workers get paid the exact same amount as the eleventh-hour workers. But what if turned out that after hiring the third-hour, 9 a.m. workers, the bank opened and the owner goes over to get his pay for six p.m. But the bank has run out of half denarii, quarter denarii, even twelfth denarii coins. All they have is full denarii. "Okay," says the vineyard owner, "Gimme a roll of the denarii coins." He imagines he'll find someone to make change for him during the day, but time gets away from him, he gets busy with administration work, and soon enough it's past the eleventh-hour, it's the twelfth hour, pay time. So all he has is denarii to pay all the workers and therefore when he pays the one hour, three hour, six hour and nine hour workers, he says, "Keep the change!" and explains to the twelve hour workers that he had no choice.

Then the unfairness of it would at least be tempered by the owner's inability to pay any other amount.

For the meaning of parables isn't actually in their literal interpretation, it's in some deeper meaning, and for me the story is not talking about money but about God's love and salvation. To me, salvation and love doesn't come in different values, it's all or nothing. Empty handed or the full denarius.

But Jesus doesn't tell it that way. Jesus instead emphasizes that this coin payment is a free choice given to each worker by the owner. The eleventh-hour worker experiences this pay as freely given mercy and grace while the six a.m. to six p.m. worker experiences the same pay then as a slap in the face, provoking the evil eye of jealousy.

The contrast of what the owner freely gives each group becomes even more stark when you find out that vineyard owners didn't really tend to go out and hire more workers several times the same day. They had other things that kept them more than

busy enough to not go back four more times the same day to hire people in the marketplace. The eleventh-hour workers are fabrications to make the parable work.

For even if there aren't eleventh-hour workers in a vineyard, there are eleventh-hour workers in other parts of life. The slacker who doesn't help in the group project but gets the same grade. The union worker who gets a raise in spite of their less-than stellar career. The rarely-used middle reliever who gets the same championship ring as the MVP.

We tend to remember the times when we have been the MVP and had to watch others receive just as much if not more than us for less work.

We tend to remember less intensely those times that we have been the slacker, the mop-up pitcher, the eleventh-hour disciple, the one who procrastinates, comes late to the job, squeezes in at the last moment, and still gets the coin.

But maybe in some cases we do. We remember the coach who let us play right field even though we couldn't field worth a darn; the teacher who let us do extra credit because they knew we were a bad test-taker, the parent who loved us and siblings equally unconditionally despite our best efforts at times to mess their lives up.

In those cases, perhaps we remember the moment when we received their grace, when the height and depth and width of love was made real to us, and we were transformed.

That is the central moment of the parable, when the owner, who to me is a representation of God, says, here is the coin I give you not because you earned it but because I choose to. I have all sorts of other coins I could give you. I could have never hired you. But here's this coin, this love. Let this love transform you, redefine you, so that you're not charity cases but beloved. Let this moment change your sense of worth and life. Keep the change.

That is the ministry of Jesus Christ in a nutshell, that life and love are gifts from God that we can never fully earn and should therefore stop trying. Jesus embodied that gift in his teachings, in his death on a cross, and in his ultimate surprise gift of resurrection life. That is the gift of Christian faith that the reformers re-discovered five hundred years ago and sought to share, the grace of God unearned, whether we are least valuable players or most valuable players.

Which brings us to those full day workers. The owner spends his time talking with them, not with the eleventh-hour workers, because this story is intended to convince them that grace is as central in their lives as in the lives of eleventh-hour folks. Yes, you may feel that you have earned your pay, the owner says, but I hired you, I arranged to pay you, this payment is only possible because of me. Why look at me with evil eyes because I am generous? It's all generosity!

Just before today's reading, at the end of chapter 19, the disciples ask Jesus what is in it for them to leave their homes and follow him from the start of his ministry. Jesus says, "Well, you'll get to sit with me in heaven! You'll be repaid many times over, and gain eternal life!" You'll get more than you ever could earn, too!

Jesus tells this story to remind his overachieving disciples and we who might overachieve in this era that God's love makes all our faith and ministry possible.

Jesus is calling those original disciples to not only receive and keep the grace represented in that coin, but to also be willing to make sharing that grace their life's work. Jesus calls them to spend their lives sharing the transformational love of God, and to discover that the more they share the change, the more valuable it becomes.

We too in the church have the special privilege today to go out and share the transformational good news that God's love claims all people who

are willing to serve God. At any time in our life's journey, Jesus welcomes us to call ourselves God's people.

This is a grace as well, a gift from God to interpret our lives as the gifts from God that they are and to tell others about it, to not get bogged down in jealousy because we worked longer but to get caught up in the love of God which is our foundation and the ultimate goal of life. Jesus says to us, "Share the life-changing message of the gospel, and you will receive grace upon grace in your discipleship. Costs, yes, but joy and reward beyond anything you could ever expected."

Life is filled with grace that you can share with each other.

Keep the change, share the change. Amen.