

SERMON SPARK!

Text: Matthew 20:14-16

Theme: God's Economy: People Over Profit

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I. GOD'S INVITATION TO A WAY OF JUST PEACE

A. GOD SPEAKS (20:14a)

1. God speaks about the importance of just relationships.
2. God speaks about peace in gratitude for what we have received.

B. GOD'S SOVREIGNTY LEADS TO FREEDOM AND PEACE (20:14b)

1. God calls upon humanity to be generous to all in need.
2. God examples the freedom of unmerited kindness.

II. DISMANTLING UNJUST SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION

A. GOD'S SOVREIGN APPEAL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE (20:15a)

1. God reminds all about being the ultimate owner of all resources.
2. God calls upon call to seek grace and salvation as a way of peace.

B. GOD'S WARNING FOR HUMANITY (20:15b)

1. God warns that an unjust heart gives way to envy, greed, and evil.
2. God encourages us to value every neighbor by having a grateful heart.

III. GOD'S HOPE FOR PEOPLE OVER PROFIT (20:16a)

A. TRUSTING IN GOD'S MORAL PRINCIPLE

1. God challenges us to remain humble regardless of social status or background.
2. God calls upon all to deepen our spiritual standing by showing acts of love.

B. GOD'S GRAND REVERSAL (20:16b)

1. God's reversal calls for the societal privileged elite to remain humble in spirit.
2. God's reversal calls for the societal outcasts to remain hopeful in eternal grace.

Narrative Context:

Jesus emphasizes the kingdom of heaven operates differently from the ways of this world. As chapter 20:14-16 speaks to the equal value that God's grace bestows upon all people. Which builds on the preceding passage, in chapter 19:16-22, when Jesus shares the story of a rich young man who came to Jesus asking, "Good teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" After Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give them to the poor, the man went away sorrowfully, because he had many possessions. Then, Peter, observing this exchange between the rich young man and Jesus, shares that the disciples have already given up everything to follow Jesus (19:27), and questions what their reward will be. Jesus answers by saying the disciples will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus also speaks to God's invitation for all people to serve and be rewarded according to God's grace, purpose and plan.

Conflicts at Play:

The conflicts at play arise as Jesus turns the expectations of the twelve disciples, upside down. In doing so, Jesus strips away the notion that there are those who are superior to others. Jesus strips away the expectation that the privileged will be rewarded unjustly. Jesus also strips away the fear of scarcity, and invites freedom, equality and a just economy to be generously rewarded on earth as it is in heaven. As Jesus challenges the disciples to fully trust in an economy of God's grace for all people.

Way of Just Peace:

In moral distress, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard workers to the disciples. As the story focuses on God's generosity in welcoming everyone into the field. It examples God as the landowner, the believers as workers, and the vineyard as the Kingdom of Heaven.

In this parable, Jesus uses a typical everyday scene to point out a spiritual truth about the value of God's beloved community. In that, this story tells the Good News about the economy of God's grace. As Jesus's story explains that God is like a landowner who went out to find people to work in the vineyard. The first group expects to be paid to pay a denarius, which is a fair day's wage. The second group expects to be paid what is fair. The last three groups have no expectations of their pay. As this tells us that the purpose of the parable is not for us to focus on the workers and what they do, but to focus on what the landowner does.

Thus, the first principle in the economy of God's grace is for the workers see the landowner as fair and just. As the Good News about the Kingdom of Heaven is that God is the Sovereign Ruler who owns all things, and at the same time graciously bestows grace and blessings upon all the beloved community.

The kind of justice and peace that God seeks is exemplified in today's lectionary by the Psalmist, who speaks on the economy of God's grace in Psalm 105, verses 17-18. It states, "Joseph, was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron: until what he had said came to pass." In 105:20-21, it goes on to state, "The king sent and released him (Joseph): the ruler of the people's set him free. He (the king) made him ruler of all his possessions." Thus, the purpose of the parable is to teach us the economy of God's grace by first helping us to see the just character of God.

Second, we see in the parable that rewards from the Kingdom of Heaven are not a matter of privilege or superiority. As the first workers were upset with the landowner because they worked longer and harder and felt they deserved a superior reward than the others who came later. The first workers, who felt privileged, argue with the landowner to change the terms of their original agreement so that they could earn more than the others. But the parable is not about the hierarchy of humanity, it is about the landowner's grace for all who serve in the vineyard.

Third, we see the economy of God's grace as having the sovereign right to distribute resources according to God's purposes. In verse 15, we hear, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" As the landowner does not have the right to be dishonest or to cheat people but does have the right to give generously to any and every one, which shows that we are equally loved by God. It is like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who instead of rejoicing in his father's generosity towards his brother, challenges his father's right to be generous and gracious. This parable is also designed to point out to us how easy it is to feel superior towards others, feel sorry for ourselves, or fail to appreciate God's grace.

The fourth principle, which speaks of dismantling economic privilege, is a key purpose on the economy of God's grace, because the story teaches that Jews and Gentiles will have equal status within the kingdom of God. This way of justice and peace challenges the beloved community to seek a Just Economy for All. As the Gentiles are the eleventh-hour workers, who in the eyes of the Jews, come into the kingdom (the vineyard), in the last hour. They are like stepchildren who do not deserve full standing in the household

of God. They question how God could give Gentiles, who are uncircumcised, not part of the covenant, have no religious tradition, and do not keep God's law, the same rewards or inheritance as the Jews.

And in response to these questions, there is an appeal to those who feel privileged to trust in God's grace, which makes us all equal members of God's covenant. In that, our standing and citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven is not a matter of when we received God's grace, but that God's grace is already upon us. As the parable is not about the work of the first workers or the work of the last workers, it is about the grace and justice of God. "So, the last will be first and the first will be last," which speaks to God's grand reversal at the end of the parable.

Jesus concludes the same way He started in verse 30 of chapter 19. In that passage, Jesus tells the parable of the rich young ruler, "But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first." As the parable in chapter 20 further illustrates this point, the kingdom of Heaven is not partial to our perceived position on earth. Rather, the rich ruler, as well as the twelve disciples, were shocked that the rich ruler's position did not qualify him to inherit the rewards of the kingdom. Instead, Jesus teaches us that in God's economy things are often opposite of what we expect. Grace is not the way we normally do things, nor the way the economy of this world usually works. This reversal of values runs counter to the prevailing logic of the day, both in the passage and today.

In the scripture, we see the workers charge the landowner as being unfair. But, why? Their argument was based on their own selfish privilege that the extra pay they wanted was pay they deserved. And yet, the parable teaches us that in the Kingdom of Heaven there is no such thing as merit, for God's grace is granted according to God's gracious purpose. "Fairness" gives way to generosity and abundance in God's Kin-dom.

God's grace gives us a way of justice, peace and joy in our relationships with people; with God; and amongst ourselves. And when we witness God's grace, it can reveal in us our petty selfishness and an attitude that we are better than others and we deserve more. But God's full grace and 'economy' of values teach us not to put ourselves above other people - we all are equally loved as God's beloved community. Instead, we are taught to humbly appreciate the extravagance and generosity of God's grace, which is freely given to all of humanity.

That is why all are welcome to answer, 'Yes,' to God's invitation to serve in the vineyard, which calls upon us to serve together with hope, by working towards creating systems

of equality and a just economy, sharing God's resources through acts of mercy, mutual aid, and policy change. This parable teaches us to trust in the economy of God's grace, which calls for a grand reversal from the unjust ways of the world as we know it to a vision of God's Kin-dom. As this grand reversal points towards "the way" of just peace, we are all invited to work together, as the beloved community, to proclaim and embody the economy of God's grace here on Earth, as it is in the Kingdom of Heaven. May it be so. Amen.