

September 20, 2020
Matthew 20:1-16
“All’s Fair in Love and Generosity”

One of my top 10 movies of all time is Field of Dreams. It stars Kevin Costner, James Earl Jones, Amy Madigan, and Ray Liotta to name just a few. The story centers around an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella who hears a voice telling him to plow under a part of his corn field and build a baseball field, which he does. After he builds the field, long deceased ball players show up and start playing on this field, the most famous of which is Shoeless Joe Jackson.

Most people, including his in-laws think he is crazy, because Ray, his wife, and his daughter are the only ones who can see the baseball players – until author Terrance Mann (played by James Earl Jones) is brought to Iowa. He too can see everything that’s going on.

Towards the end of the movie, Shoeless Joe Jackson invites Terrance Mann to go with him and the other ball players out into the cornfield where they disappear to at the end of the day.

This gets Ray’s blood boiling a little bit. He can’t understand why he’s not invited. After all, hadn’t he plowed under his corn? Hadn’t he built this ball field? Hadn’t he risked bankruptcy and foreclosure?

He runs this litany of all he has done by Shoeless Joe and concludes with “and I didn’t once ask what’s in it for me.”

Shoeless Joe responds, “What are you saying, Ray?”

“I’m saying...what’s in it for me?” is Ray’s response.

Ray Kinsella’s complaint boils down to this - it isn’t fair. He deserves to go, not Terrence Mann. Ray has done so much more than the author has done so far.

Does this sound a little familiar?

Ray Kinsella sounds a little like those guys who were the first ones hired to work out in the vineyard. They were hired for an agreed upon wage – a denarius, which was the normal day’s pay. Then off to the vineyard they went harvesting from early morning to dusk.

As the parable informs us others got hired to work the vineyard during the course of the day, with the last ones hired with just about an hour left in the work day.

Then at the end of the day it was time to get paid. The last ones to be hired are the first ones to be paid. I imagine they were shocked when the foreman handed them a denarius – a full day’s pay. Then came those hired in the afternoon – same thing – a denarius – a full day’s pay. The ones who were hired at mid-day were probably a little surprised to get the full day’s pay, but they had put in a good six hours. Mid-morning hires a full day’s pay.

Then came those who were hired bright and early when the sun had just rose, and had been at it all day under that hot sun. It is not unreasonable to think that their labor, when compared to the others, warranted at least a little something extra. Well it certainly didn't seem unreasonable to them.

But when they got up to the foreman their compensation was the same as everyone else's – a denarius, a full day's pay.

They couldn't believe it. Their response is the same as ours might have been when we finished reading the parable. That's not fair! Are you kidding me?!! Those guys who worked one hour...barely enough to work up a sweat...those guys who goofed off until the last minute...those guys...THOSE GUYS...got paid the same as us?!!

I have read this parable before and I have always liked it. But I don't think I've ever really put myself in the place of the dawn till dusk laborers.

As I started thinking about the unfairness of it all I started to think about circumstances that may have warranted this seeming unfairness.

What I came up with is based on the last group's response to the landowner when he asked them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us."

"No one hired us." Why did no one hire them? Could it be that they had some type of physical issues that would prevent them from working as hard or as long as some others?

Perhaps they were from a family or clan that was not well thought of and nobody wanted "these people" working for them.

Maybe they were aliens, non-Israelites, and therefore not worthy of working and getting paid.

So it wasn't their fault that they weren't working. They were ready, willing, and able, but it wasn't until this landowner ran across them that someone was willing to give them a chance.

Since it wasn't their fault, maybe they were more deserving of that full day's wage than we might have thought.

Well, besides the fact that the passage itself gives no indication that this might have been the case, this theory misses the mark as much as the all-day laborers complaint.

For my theory and their complaint is based on our world view of what's fair and not fair and who is deserving and who is not deserving.

How does Jesus introduce this parable?

"For the kingdom of heaven is like..."

Jesus is offering a view of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, but the all-day laborers and some of us – myself included – can't help but look at it from our perspective, which generates a response that says this may be what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, but let me tell you how we do it here on earth.

Here people get what they deserve. And you deserve it by earning it. You work a full day and you get a full day's pay. You work an hour and you get paid for an hour.

Down here, if you have a right to do something, it is the right thing to do.

Down here, we look out for number one.

Down here, might makes right.

Down here, we say not in my backyard.

These are things that all too often the kingdom of earth is like.

But Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is different. It operates on a different fairness scale. This parable seems to say, you don't always get what you deserve.

And while that seems to fly in the face of our notions of fairness, thank God we don't always get what we deserve. In the Kingdom of Heaven sometimes we get more.

And that's called grace.

Grace is God's gift to us.

It is unmerited. That is we can do nothing to earn it. It flows from God's love for us, it is not a reward for our loving God or following all the rules of the Kingdom.

Like all the workers in the parable it is based on need, not on what we've earned.

A denarius was a normal day's pay and would provide for the needs of an average family. Whether they worked all day or just one hour they received from the landowner what they needed to take care of their family for that day.

This is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, people receive what they need and no one is more or less deserving of this.

Why did Jesus tell this parable?

Was it simply a stark reminder of what the prophet Isaiah wrote:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Or is it a reminder that the Kingdom of Heaven is not simply a rebranded or improved version of the kingdom of earth, but rather it is something that is other worldly and meant to challenge the status quo. To help us move beyond the same old same old, not because that would make us more deserving, but because it would reflect what it means to be Kingdom citizens in our earthly dwelling place.

It is a reminder to me to err on the side of grace.

When I was pastoring in the local church I would often get people coming to the church office and even the parsonage looking for assistance. Food, money, gas, a hotel room perhaps. Everyone had a story and I often had little opportunity to fully check out the story to see if they were truly deserving of what little help I could usually provide.

One day was particularly trying when a woman who I had helped before called the church and told she needed some food and some things for her baby. She had no way to get to the church so I offered to shop for her and bring the groceries to her apartment, which I did. A couple of hours later I got a call from the store where I had shopped and this woman was at the courtesy desk asking to return everything for cash. I had held onto the receipt, so I told the store that if the woman didn't want the groceries they should hold them and I would come get them and take them to the food bank.

That experience made me skeptical of many if not most of the people who came seeking assistance. Were they truly in need and maybe underlying even that question was the one at the center of this parable – were they deserving?

I'm not sure that was my question to answer. What finally tempered - though if I'm honest I would have to say it didn't completely eliminate it - my skepticism and wondering if they deserved this, was that if I was to make a mistake, I wanted to err on the side of grace.

I wanted to err on the side of generosity. I wanted to err on the side of love.

And if we are to err on the side of these things, perhaps we are not erring at all.

Perhaps we are simply sharing a little bit of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

May it be so.