

**God's Justice, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 19080921**  
**Exodus 16:2-15 and Matthew 20:1-16**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 21 September, 2008**

How would you feel if you worked twice as long as someone else and got paid the same wage? You'd be upset. You might call in the labor relations board. That's probably the way some women feel who get paid less than men for the same work.

This parable of laborers in the vineyard is an uncomfortable one for us to hear. It offends our sense of fairness. It denies our economics of paying more for longer work. That's why we have overtime pay!

Why did all the workers get paid the same wage, no matter how long they worked? This is not a parable about economics. This is not a parable about labor relations. This is not a parable about working in vineyards. This is a parable about the kingdom of God. "The last will be first, and the first will be last."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus told this parable to good religious people who probably thought that because they believed in God, were religious, and did the right things, they would get more grace and more salvation than the non-religious. God would somehow love them more.

We tend to think the same way. We are good religious people. We are here in church, while others are out playing, shopping, or reading the Sunday paper. We should receive special favors. We should receive more pay. We see evil people convert on their deathbeds. They should end up in a lower level of heaven. They don't. They receive the same salvation we do. That's God's way.

God's way is different than human ways. As Isaiah quotes God, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD."<sup>2</sup> In God's way, we can't think more highly of ourselves. This keeps us humble.

This is a parable about God's realm. Here, in our human realm of economics, we have suffered a confusing and dizzying week. The stock market has tumbled because of the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers investment bank and a bailout by the Federal Reserve Board of insurance giant AIG (American International Group). Isn't it ironic that Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard would be the gospel reading for this week?

How many workers have lost their jobs while CEO's have been rewarded handsomely? How many families have lost their homes while rich corporate bankers have been bailed out? Bill Moyers notes that during the last five years of his tenure as CEO of now-bankrupt Lehman Brothers, Richard Fuld's total take was \$354 million.<sup>3</sup> John Thain, the current chairman of Merrill Lynch, taken over this week by Bank of America, has been on the job for just nine months. He pocketed a \$15 million signing bonus.<sup>4</sup> His predecessor, Stan O'Neal, retired with a package valued at \$161 million, after the company reported an \$8 billion loss in a single quarter. After Bear Stearns collapsed earlier this year and was up for sale at bargain basement prices, Chairman James Cayne sold his stake for more than \$60 million.

If that doesn't offend your sense of justice and morality, it should. This way of doing

---

<sup>1</sup>Matthew 20:16

<sup>2</sup>Isaiah 55:8

<sup>3</sup>"Moguls Steal Home While Companies Strike Out" Friday 19 September 2008, by: Bill Moyers and Michael Winship, truthout Perspective, [www.truthout.org](http://www.truthout.org)

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

business is quite a contrast to workers in the vineyard who all get paid the same wages, but who all get paid! God's economics are different than human economics. I hope and pray that we are at the end of an era that has promoted unbridled, selfish, greedy, laissez-faire capitalism.

I am the government and you are the government, and I would rather have government regulations on business than to allow immoral and unethical behaviors to continue. If we are really going to have capitalism where people invest their money in stocks of companies, then why have we allowed hedge funds, computer-generated sell-offs, short selling, leveraged buyouts and derivative contracts? If we're going to reward people for working hard, let's reward people for working hard for the good of all, not those who inherit their wealth or who make their wealth at the expense of people they have cheated or fooled.

I hope we are headed into an era where Jesus's teachings are really followed. In a world where humans take an eye for an eye, I hope we learn forgiveness. In a world at war, I hope we learn to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. In a world of hierarchies I hope we learn to value each person as a child of God. Love the stranger, whether that stranger has the proper legal papers or not.

The church cannot stand by while innocent people are duped and lose their retirement savings and their homes. We must join in the efforts of providing affordable and safe housing. We must make difficult ethical choices.

Listen to Jesus. The kingdom of heaven, he said, is like a landowner who decides to pay every worker the same wage. Being there first isn't as important as each worker's ending the day with enough money to feed a family. Protecting a pecking order isn't as important as honoring our common humanity. God's justice is not the same as human justice. That is a point we will need to learn if we are ever to live in decent and sustainable community.

If God's justice were like our justice, the Israelites would never have received manna, quail, or water! In a dog eat dog world, those Israelites would have died in the desert, but we live in God's world.

By saying that "the last will be first, and the first will be last," Jesus was challenging a world in which power served itself, weakness lost, jungle survival laws underlay human behavior, and life would always be better for the one-up. God's ways not our ways.

God needs you to tell others about God's ways. Tell them about a community of faith, about how good it feels to be forgiven of past misdeeds, about satisfaction that comes from serving others by working for Habitat for Humanity, volunteering in hospitals, or teaching someone to read English. Minister to the world by inviting others to this church.

Remember that, even though they come into the vineyard at a later time, they are entitled to the same wages, same love, and same salvation you are. God's love, salvation, available to anyone, no matter whether turn to it early or late.