

Short Stories by Jesus -- Session Three --The Workers in the Vineyard

Levine points out that, according to ancient Jewish sources, householders hiring laborers "cannot offer less than the going rate" for their location. In this case, a Roman denarius would supply a family for 3-6 days of food. The householder agrees to pay this amount because it is right -just, fair or proper. What does this agreement suggest about his ethical character?

According to Josephus in his *Antiquities*, "when the Temple was completed, the 18,000 + workmen were poor people - "If any one of them did labor for a single hour, he received his pay."

According to Levine that the use of the term "idle" for the workers still waiting to be hired actually means they were without work - not lazy. How does this influence your understanding of the parable?

Turn to Matthew 20:1-16 and read it.

Imagine you were one of those hired to work at the beginning of the day. How would you have felt when all were paid the same as you? How do you define the terms "just"and "fair"?

Imagine if you were the one hired at the end of the day, yet paid the same as the first workers. How would you feel?

The first hired expected to be paid more - their first concern was the money. They wanted to be treated as better because they had worked longer.

The last hired benefitted from the contract they agreed to with the householder and the work they had already done, however little.

Do you think the householder offered a sufficient explanation for his actions?
Based on how you heard this story, what would you have entitled it?

Levine notes that interpreters are often resistant to reading this parable as a parable about ordinary economics, preferring instead to apply it to spiritual matters alone - often focused on salvation. She states that if someone were to approach Jesus today and asked if he was saved, his response would take the forms of the questions: Do your children have enough to eat? Or, do you have shelter for the night? What do you think about using this parable as a guide to Public Policy? What might that look like?

So, where's the surprise in this Parable? Could it be about economics? Levine suggests:
Was it a warning to the householders to act as God does, rather than as some rich guy does?
What can we learn from these three groups? Where can we see ourselves within this Parable?

Levine: "If we look at economics, at the pressing reality that people need jobs and that others have excess funds, we find what should be a compelling challenge to any hearer. And, in that story, we learn what it means to act as God acts, with generosity to all. And that's what parables are supposed to do.