

This morning's sermon is the first I will preach in a series about being led by God and following God, a theme that seems particularly apt as the lectionary has us journey with the Israelites who are following God out of slavery to the promised land. Instead of the land of milk and honey that they expect, the Israelites find themselves journeying through the desert. As water and food become scarce, the Israelites begin to doubt God. Would God lead them out of Egypt to starve them in the desert, they wonder. It doesn't seem fair! But, as we heard, God is with them and provides for their need.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples a parable about the kingdom of God and about what it means to follow God and work towards that kingdom.

**SKIT**

Landowner: *(to Laborer 1)* Good morning. I'm here at the marketplace bright and early looking for people to work in my vineyard today. I'll pay the usual daily wage of \$80. How does that sound?

Laborer 1: Sounds good.

Landowner: Great! You're hired.

**PAUSE**

Landowner: *(to herself)* Well, it's now noon, and here I am back at the marketplace. It looks like there are still people milling around waiting for work. Let me see if some of them want to work in my vineyard. *(to Laborer 2)* Good day! If you're looking for work, you should go to my vineyard. I'll pay you whatever is right.

Laborer 2: *(to herself)* She'll pay whatever is right, hunh? The day's already half done, but I guess something is

better than nothing. *(To landowner)* Okay. I'll go work in your vineyard.

**PAUSE**

Landowner: *(to herself)* I can't believe, the day is almost over, it's four o'clock and there are STILL laborers hanging out in the marketplace. *(To Laborer 3 – a little bit exasperated)* Why are you standing here idle all day?

Laborer 3: Because no one has hired me.

Landowner: *(Shaking her head)* Go on. You go work in my vineyard, too.

Laborer 3: *(to himself)* Well, it's kind of late, but what do I have to lose? *(to the landowner)* Alright. I'll work in your vineyard.

**PAUSE**

Landowner: The workday is finally done. All of you have worked in my vineyard today, come line up for your pay: I want the person who got here last to line up first, and the person who got here first to line up last. Right. Okay, you got here last, here's your pay, \$80, a day's wage.

Laborer 1: Oh my gosh! Look, she's giving that person who worked here for just an hour a WHOLE day's wage. I've been here all day, working since early this morning and right through the hottest part of the day. I've sweated for my pay. If she gave that worker a whole day's wage, I wonder how much I'm going to get....

**BREAK – sit down for part of the sermon. When you hear “Let's go back to that worker who wonders how much he's going to get,” come forward again.**

Let us pray. Holy one, speak to us this morning through word and story. Make your presence known among us. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“I wonder how much I’m going to get,” we hear that first laborer ponder. He has risen early in the morning, been the first among those hired by this story’s landowner, and he has toiled beneath the hot sun all day. He has worked hard to make his living and to do right by himself and the landowner who hired him. I, and perhaps many of you, can relate to this man. I work hard and take pride in the work that I do. And I often (maybe even always?) expect to get compensated for my work, to receive praise, even a special reward, for my hard work. In our culture where outputs are correlated to inputs and rewards are based on performance, we expect to be paid according to how much, how hard and how well we work. The American Dream is the perfect example of this: if you work hard enough, the story goes, you will be rewarded with great success. The thing is, in order to be successful, we often have to compete with others, knowing that there are not enough jobs to go around, knowing that promotions are few and far between, knowing that we need to work for that Christmas bonus. In this competitive culture, we have winners and losers, and we do what we can (though it’s not always in our power) to be winners at the end of the day. I certainly resonate with that first worker: work harder and longer and you should be rewarded for it. After all, it’s only fair. But it seems that Jesus wants to tell his disciples something different. It seems that God’s dream for our world is a little bit different than the American dream. And, in a nation where, as I just read in the New York Times, the poor are still getting poorer, in a nation where unemployment just keeps rising, in a nation where children go home to houses without food, I think

we can be grateful that God’s dream for the world looks pretty different.

Let’s go back to that worker who wonders how much he’s going to get....

### SKIT

Landowner: *(to laborer 2)* Ah yes, so I’ve already paid the worker who got here last \$80, a full day’s wage. You got here second, here’s your pay: \$80, a day’s wage.

*(to laborer 3)* You got here first, here’s your pay: \$80, a day’s wage.

Laborer 1: What?? That other guy only worked for an hour, and you paid him the same as me, and I did your hard work all day long, and under a hot sun, too.

Landowner: Friend, I’m not hurting you at all. This morning when I hired you, didn’t we agree that I would pay you one day’s wage? What is it to you if I choose to give this last worker the same as I give you? Can’t I do what I choose with what belongs to me? *(Pause)* Are you jealous because I am generous?

It just doesn’t seem fair: in the kingdom of God the first will be last and the last will be first. In the kingdom of God, all of God’s followers get the same reward. I will admit that I struggled with this text this week. I struggled to see beyond my initial reaction, the prideful reaction of that first laborer – how can this last person get the same pay as the first? It just doesn’t seem fair.

### Pause

But then, maybe that’s the point. Maybe Jesus’ point is that the kingdom of God is not based on fairness, that God’s movement and work in the world is not fair.

**Pause**

Maybe, maybe, Jesus' point in all of this is that God is better than fair: God, like the landowner, is generous. This is good news. And we find the good news of God's generosity in the Exodus story where God provides manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. God responds to the Israelites' lack of food and their lack of faith with a daily provision, daily bread fallen from heaven, a daily reminder that they are not alone but that God journeys with them. Not only does God accompany them, but God provides for them generously, ensuring that everyone receives equally and has enough. We find the good news of God's generosity in Jesus' parable about the landowner who pays the laborers equally so that they all have enough.

I wonder, as we strive to follow God's lead, what God's unfair generosity might look like today. I wonder if it would ensure that everyone had enough food, clothing, shelter. I wonder if it would provide equal education to all children. I wonder if it would offer health care for everyone. I wonder if perhaps it would hire workers and pay them fairly regardless of their nationality or citizenship status. I wonder if it might allow any two people who love each other to commit to one another in marriage. I wonder if it might give up God's only son to die on a cross that we might know the grace of God. That last one in particular seems pretty unfair. And oh so generous.

This week, as I wrestled with these stories, I was grateful for the witness of this community, of this congregation to God's generosity. There are many examples of it, but there is one that I want to share in particular. Yesterday I had breakfast with the Christian Men's Fellowship. As the treasurer wrapped up a review of the group's finances, someone asked, “Have we given any money to Greensboro Urban Ministries this year? I think we should do that.” Someone else piped up, “And you know, Camp

Caroline got hit pretty hard by Hurricane Irene, let's give to them, too.” “\$100 to Urban Ministries and \$200 to Camp Caroline,” came a suggestion. “Camp Caroline needs the money, let's give them \$300 and Urban Ministries \$200.” Then another voice, “Well, there are so many hungry people in our community, right around the corner from us, and you all remember Rev. Moses talking about ways we could reach out to serve OUR community. If we're going to give Camp Caroline \$300, we should give Urban Ministries \$300 as well.” And just like that, they had voted to give away \$600. God's generosity is good news for all of us. As followers of God, I think that the best thing we can do with good news such as this is to share it.

8:30 am: Let us pray. Holy one, sometimes we are surprised and challenged by your seeming unfairness, but if we open our eyes and hearts to your work, we see that indeed, you are better than fair. You are generous. As we strive to follow you in our daily lives, help us to live out the good news of your generosity. Amen.

Call to Communion – 11:00 am

As God provided manna to the Israelites, so God feeds us. At the communion table, we find a place where all are fed, where all have enough. At this table, we experience the unfair, undeserved generosity of God. Here, we are nourished that we may share the good news of God's generosity to the world. Let us prepare to receive of God's gifts by singing together hymn number