

FROM MICROSOFT TO DACA

TEXT: Matthew 20:1-16

In the business world of startup companies, employees who are hired first typically reap the greatest profits. Often in the form of stock options that skyrocketed in value when the company goes public. People hired last, on the other hand, earn much less. This business model spelled very good news for Marc McDonald, pictured in the middle row of the photo on the insert. As Microsoft's first employee Marc wore badge #00001. Forty-two years after Bill Gates and Paul Allen started the company in 1975, for the fiscal year ending June 2016, Microsoft had revenues of \$85.32 billion, and employed more than 114,000 people in 108 countries and regions.

Such are the ways of the world, and more power to Marc and the fortunate few like him. But in today's Gospel parable we have a sort of case study, to remind us that the kingdom Jesus inaugurated is very different from the business models of most startups. As he so often did, his punch line shocked his listeners with a radical reversal that subverted conventional wisdom.

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a foreman hired laborers early in the morning, then successively throughout the day at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours. A twelve-hour day of manual labor, with the "burden of the work in the heat of the day" is a long day. That evening the foreman settled accounts, paying those who had worked a meager one hour the same as those who had worked twelve hours. Just imagine if Microsoft hired you this afternoon as employee #55,001, and after the interview informed you that your salary would be the same as Marc McDonald's or the same as Bill Gates. You might be thrilled at this turn of events, but Marc McDonald wouldn't be, nor would the shareholders.

Now, I was raised by parents who believed in saving. We didn't have much money when I was growing up, but the notion of putting something away for the future was always on the table. During my working career at Weyerhaeuser I was dedicated to

funding my 401k plan to the maximum of my ability. I spent the latter years of my work talking to workers at all levels of the company about the value of not only putting away some of their salary, but taking advantage of the free money that the company was giving them as an incentive to save.

But we all know that life has a way of thwarting the best laid plans. In fact, it would seem that our current economic situation is so complicated and confused that it is thwarting everyone's best laid plans. Even those who study economics and follow the markets closely are scratching their heads and throwing their hands up in resignation.

Economics at that level may be hard to understand, but at a more down-to-earth level, it's not hard at all. You have to plan your budget based on the principle that income must exceed expense. If it doesn't you have to make other plans, or you have to cut expenses. That applies to family budgets, church budgets, and businesses as well. And when it comes to running a business, again the principles are fairly straightforward: you reward the employees who perform the best, and to those who don't perform you give instruction and warning, and finally when all else fails, you let them go.

But in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells a story that reflects a completely different way of looking at things. In this story a vineyard owner pays his workers on the principle of generosity, rather than on the principle of merit. This story is meant to illustrate "the Kingdom of Heaven". This is just a more reverent way of saying "the Kingdom of God". They both refer to the same thing: a way of living that puts into practice God's justice and peace and freedom for all people. It is a goal toward which everything in Scripture is moving. It is the hope that continues to inspire faith and love on the part of those who seek to live as the people of God.

In our story, when it becomes time to pay the workers for their labor, things begin to get strange. The vineyard owner instructs that the workers be paid beginning with the last to be hired – and he pays them all the same thing! Those who worked only one hour get a full day's wage, just like those who put in a full 12 hours! This part makes no sense

if you're trying to run a business. Think about it – if you tried to run a business on the basis of paying everybody the same thing regardless of how well they worked, your business wouldn't last very long.

So here are the early workers grumbling, and the vineyard owner says to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? I choose to give to this last worker the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

The vineyard owner blows apart our mentality of “deserving”. It is not about what we deserve, or think we deserve, based on what we do or do not put in. The emphasis of the parable is on the generosity of the vineyard owner who pays all laborers what they need to provide for their families, no matter how many hours they have worked. The employer simply insists that he has a right to be generous with what belongs to him. The story of the workers in the vineyard insists that in the kingdom that God envisions, the realm in which God's justice and peace and freedom defines life for all people, there is nothing to earn. In a very real sense, we are all “eleventh-hour workers”, regardless of what we may have done. In this kingdom, everyone receives the generosity of God's grace, God's unconditional love, and God's unfailing mercy.

This is a parable about God's kingdom. And God, it turns out, is not fair. God does not play by our rules. God does not give us what we deserve. And thank God for that! For if each of us got exactly what we deserved, where would we be? In fact, God lavishes grace and mercy on all of us, no matter how late we have come to the vineyard.

Certainly God cares about fairness in our human economy and market places. God calls us to work for justice, so that all can receive a livable wage and daily bread, so that all can have a roof over their heads. At the same time, God's economy, the economy of the kingdom, goes way beyond fairness. There is nothing to be earned in God's economy. There is only God's generosity freely spent – on us.

Our modern capitalist impulses will lead us to think that the laborers are providing a mutual service to the landowner. And it may be that Matthew's first hearers were tempted, at least initially, to think the same. In our cynical moments (which we mistakenly term "realist") we are prone to reduce human interactions to self-interest: if this is real economic exchange, then there's something in it for the landowner as well. But Jesus' parable is not about a landowner looking for help from others as much as it's about a landowner who helps others. More to the point: it's about a landowner who sweeps up idle (and therefore lost) people and gives them a purpose. Indeed, given that this is a parable about God's kingdom, what we're talking about here is the purpose we've been looking for, or avoiding, all along: *God's* purpose for us.

Likewise, each of us receives our life and purpose and all that sustains it as a gift from God, not as something earned. How easily we forget that, and begin to think that somehow we deserve all that we have. When we forget that all we have is a gift, we so easily become resentful of God's generosity to others.

The flipping of the world order that Jesus offers is often linked to the kingdom of God. The kingdom, of course, is the place where God reigns, and we can live in the presence of God. And it can, says Jesus, be anywhere, among us now, today, or ahead of us, after death. Whenever time opens into grace, the kingdom is there.

And all the players in the kingdom parables are images of God and can be images for us to fulfill – if we choose. The Generous Employer, the Careful Gardener, The Wild Sower. The Baker who makes enough for everyone (like the one who made recent news as he baked enough bread to feed his neighbors who were flooded out following Hurricane Harvey). The Buyer who sells everything for a Pearl or for Treasure in a field.

But each image also trips us up and makes us balk at accepting it: the kingdom requires us to give up some cherished values, some long-standing opinions, in order to enter the presence and accept the generosity of God.

And now we are caught in a rancorous public squabble about generosity, specifically about generous hospitality to those called Dreamers, those adults who have lived in the US since they were small children, whose parents brought them here. They have never known another country, English is their language, they have attended American schools all their lives, even served in the military in defense of their adopted country, and many are now productive, tax-paying citizens, doing all kinds of skilled work and contributing through it and through their taxes to the support of this nation.

Howling against the DACA act, which would allow them to stay here, are those who feel it is unfair that they entered without due process. I have to ask them, why would we prefer to admit people who have never lived here, whose English is not as good, and whose work abilities are not as good? Who could be a better fit for the US than the Dreamers are?

But there is a dark side to this argument: sending these adults back to a homeland that is not their home would subject them to misery, for they are unfit for life there in every way. It would separate them from their communities, their friends, their jobs. Not to keep them here is cruel.

And in Jesus' parable of the Generous Employer, the same reality is present. Those who worked the fewest hours will not be able to live on the little pay an hourly rate would afford them. They need a full day's pay. And if the Employer is willing to offer it, why should we, who have had the assurance of a full day's work, complain?

Marc McDonald was the first employee hired by Microsoft. He was a fortunate young man: born in America, trained in America, and provided with a secure career with an American company.

The Dreamers are not unlike Marc. They have been trained in America, and have paid taxes to America, but unlike Marc, they are being threatened with the loss of a secure career with any American company.

The kingdom Jesus spoke of is a little bit like America: a place where we have to do the difficult work of making room for people whose experience isn't like ours, but who are just exactly the people we need. Only we can't see it at first. We can only see it at last. So in all kinds of ways, first becomes last, and last becomes first – in the parable, in hope, in kingdom time, and in faithful life.

The parable of the Generous Employer is about grace. It is about mercy. And about hope. And about the image of God, in us and in the world.