

St. Andrew's UMC  
September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008  
Matthew 20:1-16  
“Labor Dispute in the Kingdom of Heaven ”

Nowadays, I am hearing that the California Correctional Officers' Union is driving a recall campaign against the Governor. Unions have gained considerable political power nowadays, and they are a formidable force to reckon with for any business organization, even for the state government.

I was wondering, how the concept of union fits into the overall scheme of the kingdom of Heaven . Is Jesus for, or against, the union? Or rather, is Jesus neutral about the union?

If we say that Jesus is pro-union, then the parable that Jesus is saying would seem to go against the collective bargaining. Basically, the employer or entrepreneur has the final say in what to pay and how to treat his employees. What is considered very important in today's labor—seniority and equitable wage—is tossed out, judging by the statement which the owner of the vineyard made:

**'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'**

Actually, it seems that the owner did abide by the labor contract: he did promise everyone a denarius for the labor in his vineyard. It would seem, however, that he is not practicing the equitable wage system, for the guys who showed up early got paid the same wage as those who showed one hour before the closing time. The commonsense would tell us that those who worked more should be paid more.

How would you like to work for an owner such as this? Is this how it is in the kingdom of Heaven ? Can you unionize and drive a collective bargain in the kingdom of Heaven ? Or, as some of us are already thinking, “If that is how things work in the kingdom of Heaven , I will show up for work after lunchtime. Why bust my behind getting up early to go to work?”

We miss an important principle, however, if we see the kingdom of Heaven from the human perspective. The human employers seek to pay less for more work, and the workers seek less work for more pay. As long as any one side insists on its own way of getting things done, there will be always a struggle between the employer and the employees.

In addition, the modern economy must allow for those who are called investors, or, rather known as speculators, who do not work, but provide the capital. They don't bat a single eye to what happens to the workers. They care only for their stock value. The bottom line that feeds the capitalistic economy is greed, and we are looking at the greed-fueled economy at its finest right now. Many thought they could make easy money by investing in the housing market. You can go only so far on the property value that exists only on paper.

A denarius is the wage for a day-laborer who performed the day's worth of work. A day-laborer is one of those who actually put out honest work. Day-laborers are not the employees who have health benefits and retirement accounts. They do not have any job security. They do not have any means to drive a collective bargain. They do not have any investment portfolios. They are completely vulnerable to the whims of the owner. They work a day's worth of labor, and they get paid the day's worth of wages. They have families that depend on that daily wage to survive.

But we must address the way day-laborers get to work. The owner or the manager would show up where the day-laborers congregate. He will size up the workers, and pick the ones that look strong. He will bypass the small ones, old ones, and sickly ones. These ones almost never get picked. They hang around all day, hoping that some one would come around and pick them. Imagine how it must feel to return home empty handed, as the sun sets. This is the context of the parable which Jesus is telling.

The fact that the vineyard owner repeatedly went out to get the workers should tell us something unusual about the owner. That is what separates the kingdom of Heaven from the kingdom of earth.

The parable of the kingdom of Heaven provides a perspective that is not found in the usual labor relationship. The kingdom of Heaven is concerned about the "living wage." If the owner of the vineyard paid the workers

according to the hours—which is the usual way—those who were offered work later in the afternoon would not have been able to feed their families.

Whether you worked from the morning or from one hour before the closing time, you have a family to feed back at home. The vineyard owner understood that, and paid the living wage to every worker. That generosity of the vineyard owner reflects the principle of the kingdom of Heaven : everyone gets an equal chance to make a living. This equitability is the principle of the kingdom of Heaven .

The fact that a particular employee has the seniority does not mean in the kingdom of Heaven that the other newbie and his family should survive by skipping meals, until he gains the proper seniority. The fact that the older employee and the new employee got paid equally is not an unfair labor practice, but a practice that guarantees the living wage to every worker. That is how things work in the kingdom of Heaven , and that is the justice of the kingdom of Heaven . This principle is not visible to the world driven by profit and greed.

**But the question still stands: Is Jesus for or against the union? Before we answer that, we must question this first: why would anyone assume that Jesus is pro-entrepreneurship? The union came into being, just because the business owners exploited the workers. The business entity and the union entity are purely the product of the human activities driven by the selfish motivation. Why should we assume that God would take side of any entity driven by the selfish motivation?**

I do not believe that God would take the side of either the business or the union. Instead, God would say this: “Workers, do your work diligently; owners, do pay your workers the equitable, living wages.” I do not believe God is neutral on the labor issues. God has a definite idea of how workers should be treated, and what the owner could do beyond the minimum requirement of fulfilling the contract. Which employer would do more than what the contract requires?

**Is it true that Jesus was trying to get involved with labor dispute of his time? Do labor unions claim that God is on their side? Do business owners assert that God is on their side? Would God take any side, when profit-mongering and greed are the rules of the game? People tend to confuse that God is God of institutions. God is not. I do believe in one thing, however:**

God hears the cry of the oppressed, and calls his children to do something about it.

Jesus was trying to tell something about the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom of Heaven, God calls the laborers to work. Whether one responded early or later that day, it matters not. Each one is promised a wage, and God would keep that promise. The workers should be satisfied that God honored God's end of the bargain and more. The workers should not really find fault that God graciously went beyond the mandate of the contract, and treats others with generosity. Who can keep God from being generous to whomever God choose to be?

God also calls today each and every one of us to the mission and ministry of the kingdom of Heaven. Some have received Jesus into their lives 50 years ago. Maybe others did only 5 years ago. Still, others may be trying to determine, if committing their lives to Jesus is something that they should do. The rest may be only interested in the company and friendship. But who knows when they would commit their lives to the kingdom?

If you had three sons, would you love only the first born, and treat the rest with less love, just because they are not old enough? Whether we have committed our lives to Jesus 50 years ago or 5 years ago, there is no distinction in the membership in the kingdom of Heaven. Every one is given the authority to become a child of God. Every one deserves God's love.

The kingdom of Heaven has no respect for the pecking order or the seniority: the last will be first, and the first will be last. God remembers those who have been rejected. In the kingdom of Heaven, there is no privilege or honor that separates one from the other. Everyone is treated as a child of God. Those above distinctions are what human beings created among themselves, and they are not spiritual, but earthly. The kingdom of Heaven does its best to eradicate those man-made distinctions, because everyone is a saint in the kingdom of Heaven.

All glory is to God, and we are merely grateful that God called us to work in God's field. We cannot expect that God will present us with the certificate of appreciation or the medal of honor for what we have done.

There is something in the kingdom of Heaven that we just know will not work in the kingdom of earth. Love your enemies? Turn the other cheek? Give away my extra coat? Love one another as I love myself? Why can't I serve God and money at once?

It will not work, *not* because there is an inherent deficiency in the kingdom of Heaven, but because it is *not* practiced. We teach our kids in the Sunday school to share with one another, but we prepare them for the ruthless competition, as they enter the middle school, college, and the job market. We teach our kids to shun violence, but we train them to kill, once they are recruited to serve in the military.

Maybe, instead, we should teach our kids when, where, how, and why violence should be used. Maybe violence takes a more insidious form—it is the prejudice and the poverty our society maintains. Isn't it violence that people driven by greed collectively structure a social system where it is impossible for an average person to have a roof over the head?

If we are committed to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, and create a faith community that lives the principles of the kingdom of Heaven, we shall soon see the kingdom of Heaven in our midst.