

Working in the Vineyard
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I recently came across an article on the ten happiest jobs. The research was put forth by the University of Chicago and was featured in the Christian Science Monitor and then Forbes magazine. So I'll begin with the 10th happiest job and work my way up—number 10 operating engineers (they get to play with giant toys), number 9 financial sales service agents (they make about \$90,000 a year and have a 40 hour work week), number 8 psychologists (and Forbes states, "psychologists may or may not be able to solve other people's problems, but it seems that they have managed to solve their own.")

The seventh happiest job—artists (it's incredibly satisfying to create art.) Number 6—teachers (the profession continues to attract young idealists), special education teachers are number 5, number 4—authors (and the article states, "for most authors, the pay is ridiculously low or non-existent, but the autonomy of writing down the contents of your own mind apparently leads to happiness.")

Number 3—physical therapists (social interactions and helping people make it a happy job for most.) Number 2—firefighters (80% of firefighters reported being happy), and the number 1 happiest job of all—clergy (and the article states, "the least worldly are reported to be the happiest of all.")¹ Now, I'm not certain I love that description, but yes, being a minister, rabbi, priest, imam, etc is a happy job. And if I ever seem too grumpy around here, I give you full permission to remind me of this sermon.

But I wasn't just looking around the internet to waste time this week. I really have been thinking a lot about jobs when I've been delving into this parable from the Gospel of Matthew. Because the parable is all about employment, pay, working, economic justice or injustice depending on whose perspective we take in this story. This parable is about the kingdom of God exceeding our expectations and that wonderful line we have from Jesus himself, "The last will be first and the first will be last."

In Jesus' day, day laborers had a really tough existence. Forbes also coincidentally has a seven worst jobs list, and if we translated this modern day listing to antiquity I have a feeling being a day laborer would have been one of the worst jobs around. They would stand in the marketplace hoping to be hired to do odd-jobs for richer men. Some days they would get hired early and be able to work all day and be paid a decent sum.

Other days, there might not have been enough work to go around and they might have stood there all day hoping to have a one-day manual labor job, only to return home empty-handed, disappointed, and probably incredibly frustrated. It's also important to note that this day to day existence is still a reality for many people in our world, especially agricultural workers who work during the harvest season from day to day but may not always have steady work even when the crops are in. The labor presented in the parable really is a reality for some people still to this day.

Jesus begins the parable by saying, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." If we try to think how this would play out, the presumably wealthy landowner (who has a probably happy job) goes to the marketplace to hire relatively poor laborers (who may have unhappy jobs, or at least unstable stable jobs, at any rate.)

We all know the phrase, the early bird get the worm? So probably the men who may have really needed the money or were the most reliable were there early. They needed and wanted the work and so they went with the landowner to toil in his fields all day and receive their just compensation.

The landowner goes back at 9 AM, Noon, 3 PM, and then 5 PM and also picks up other guys to work the fields. So evening comes, which means everybody gets to be paid for the work he did, and everybody receives the exact same wage. From the guy who was there at dawn and worked in the field for 8 or 9 hours to the guy who got hired at 5 PM and may have only worked an hour and two. They all got paid the exact same amount.

Now I don't know about you, but this parable is hard for me. Because when I was in high school and college, I worked for really good family friends who are farmers. I mostly worked at their corn stand and farmer's market—selling produce, bagging up dozens of ears for big orders, sitting outside by the side of a highway. It wasn't always a blast, but I actually loved my job and enjoyed most of the people I got to talk to all day.

I actually worked for them for ten summers total, including last summer when I was applying to serve churches. I told Dale, the farmer who really is like a second father to me, on a day that I was feeling particularly sullen and moody, that I was so glad I now had a Master's degree in order to say, "Corn is \$5.00 a dozen." And his response was simply that I should never forget my roots.

But occasionally if Dale needed my help on the farm, I would agree to help him out with odd jobs, including stacking hay in the barn. The first time I went out to stack hay, I came downstairs at my parents' house in shorts and a t-shirt and my dad (who grew up on a farm) looked at me, laughed, and told me to go change because I needed to wear long sleeves and pants.

I immediately complained that it was 90 degrees out and I was going to be doing hard work outside and I really didn't want to be wearing hot clothing. My father patiently explained that even though I'm not allergic to hay, my skin would get irritated and I would get some scratches and I needed to at least bring them along.

I came home from my day of labor covered in sweat (each hay barrel weighs about 40 pounds—this is why I'm going to be so good at unloading the pumpkin truck, just saying. . .) But anyway, my arms were aching. I had hay dust all over me, some scratches here and there (I refused to wear the long sleeved shirt though I did end up putting on the pants after I accidentally tripped and fell in the hay loft and got all scratched up). But to top it all off, I had bright red, sore hands from the ropes that hold the hay barrels together cutting into my palms all day long.

I had dust in my eyes, up my nose, my face had dirt all over it, and I had hay in my hair—it was a really good look for me. My dad asked how it was, and I said something to the effect of being happy I didn't have to grow up on a farm like him or Dale, for that matter. Because it was really hard work and I was exhausted.

So that's my minor manual day labor story—having to stack hay occasionally on hot summer days. And so this week I really have been imagining how it must have felt to be the early day laborers in today's parable, to go out in the fields and toil in the hot sun all day and then to see that you get paid the exact same amount as some guy who just worked an hour. When you work that hard for that long, you want to be fairly compensated. And maybe the guy next to you getting compensated the same wage even if he worked less hours, well maybe that is the landowner's business, but it just doesn't seem that fair.

What makes this parable even more troubling for me is that many of the historical Jesus research points to Nazareth, where Jesus was from, as being a small hill town in the middle of nowhere. Nazareth may have had anywhere from 400-2,000 people in the population, and the main people in town? Agricultural laborers, tenant farmers, and manual laborers of modest economic resources. Jesus, it is assumed, was probably part of the laboring class with his family.

So what I'm saying is that this is Jesus' world, he is speaking probably even from personal experience. He may have even been out and worked in some of these fields, or done odd jobs with Joseph. Jesus knows that this work is tough. He knows how the lives of day laborers go. Because he himself is from a community with presumably a ton of small farmers, manual laborers, and day laborers!

And he's saying that when the men who had worked all day complained, that they really shouldn't because who are they to question the generosity of the land owner? Who are they to say that he can't be as generous as he wants to be? It's his land, it's his money, he hired the men and paid them according to how he wanted to pay them.

That's why the landowner says, "Friend I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

And I think that's what we have to wrestle with this morning—should generosity like this be judged and condemned? Was the man right to pay everybody the same across the board?

Maybe it's just me, but it remains a hard parable to reconcile because maybe I'm just not that generous. Maybe I'm too wrapped up in just compensation for the type of job and the hours worked. Maybe despite being a minister and having the happiest job there is, I'm just a grumbling, complaining person. Maybe I have a mild case of post traumatic stress from those summer days stacking hay on the farm in Ohio. I don't know.

But this passage points to the sometimes upside-down notions of the Kingdom of God. It's like Bob Dylan says in one of my favorite songs, "For the loser now will be later to win, for the times they are a-changin'". The first will be last and the last will be first. The people who may be the supposed dregs of society are the best guests to invite to your dinner party.

Or it's like when Jesus says that the shepherds go out and find that lost sheep and leave the 99 in the wilderness to fend for themselves for awhile. And the shepherd comes back victoriously with the one little lost sheep he found slung across his shoulders, a triumphant smile on his face, the little sheep happy and safe. Maybe you'd be mad if you're one of the 99, but how would you feel if you were the one who was lost and now is found?

So in the end, God bless the generous people who exist in our world like the landowner. God bless the grumbling laborers and the ones who showed up late for work that day. God bless all of you for hiring me so I don't have to stack hay anymore. And may we all attempt to be half as generous as that landowner in the way we treat one another. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2011/09/12/the-ten-happiest-jobs/>