

Together in Grace

[Exodus 16:2-15](#)

[Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45](#)

[Philippians 1:21-30](#)

[Matthew 20:1-16](#)

When I was in India, in between teaching, we spent a lot of time on the road. One of our drivers was a Dalit, what used to be called an untouchable. He spoke beautiful English, and we talked most of our drives. Every so often, on the longer stretches, he would reach up and rub a small pendant hanging from his rearview mirror. I finally asked him about it. He told me it was an evil eye: an amulet from folk tradition holding that a person's own jealousy is so powerful it can genuinely harm someone else just by looking at them enviously. He touched the pendant to remind himself not to let envy take hold of his heart when he encountered someone else's good fortune. A striking practice for someone who wasn't even permitted in the buildings we went between because of his birth.

I've been thinking about that pendant all week, because today's gospel has its own evil eye in it. When the landowner in Jesus's parable is confronted by workers who feel cheated, he asks them, literally in the Greek, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" In Jesus's story, though, the evil eye doesn't harm the person it's aimed at. It reveals the harm already crouching within the one doing the looking.

This parable doesn't come out of nowhere. Just before it, Peter says what many of us are thinking somewhere underneath the surface of our piety: "We've left everything to follow you: what do we get out of this?" Jesus's answer is that "the last will be first, and the first will be last". Then he tells **this** story, as if to make sure we can't miss the point: the kingdom of God does not work according to our metrics.

The workers standing idle in the marketplace at nine, noon, and five weren't lazy. They were day laborers; people who needed to be hired every single day just to eat that night. No one

had chosen them yet. That's the whole of their story; the text won't let us assign them any more worthiness, or unworthiness, than that. And at the end of the day, the landowner pays all of them enough for a full day's needs, regardless of the number of hours they worked.

The workers who'd been there since dawn aren't upset because they didn't receive enough. They received exactly what they were promised. They're upset because everyone else received the same as they did. Their complaint isn't scarcity. It's comparison. "You have made **them** equal to us." Which is the point of everything else you will hear this morning, because it's true. And that is exactly what happened. Jesus concedes that the first workers did, in fact, work harder than the late arrivals. It turns out that equality can feel like loss if we've grown used to standing just a little better positioned than somebody else. We don't love admitting this about ourselves. But let's watch our own gut reactions the next time someone gets what we worked years for, seemingly overnight: the promotion, the recovery, the recognition, the ease. Watch what happens in our body. That flicker isn't really about **them**. It's the evil eye Jesus is naming, and it's aimed, first, right back at us.

If the vineyard parable diagnoses our comparison problem, Exodus shows us God's alternative. The Israelites, only weeks out of slavery, are hungry, and they say so loudly, fearfully, and regretfully for the full pots of meat they remember in Egypt. God doesn't rebuke them for saying they're hungry. God knew how difficult it was for them to enjoy their new freedom when their stomachs were growling. So, God feeds them.

And here's a detail so subtle it's easy to walk past: before any food arrives, the text tells us that as Aaron speaks to the whole congregation, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. Sit with that for a second. The wilderness, in this story, isn't a backdrop. It's the actual condition they're standing in: trackless, foodless, with no means to provide for themselves, the very place of testing and radical dependence. And that is precisely what they're staring into when they look up. Not away from their fear toward some safer horizon, but straight into the emptiness itself. And it's there, in that stare, that the glory

of the Lord shows up: not as a burning bush at a safe distance, not as tablets on a mountain, but as a cloud. A thing they cannot quite name. Another what is it?, every bit as opaque and unownable as the manna will be the next morning. God does not clear the wilderness away before appearing in it. God appears inside the very thing they were afraid to look at, and the fullness they receive from it (the text plainly says they had their fill) comes from a source none of them can explain, predict, or control any more than they will be able to control tomorrow's bread. And notice who is staring into that wilderness together. Every Israelite, whether steadfastly strong or weak with hunger, watches the same impossible cloud appear in the same impossible wilderness. There is no separate glory reserved for whoever endured the longest or trusted the hardest. It is the same reversal waiting for us in the vineyard: in the place where none of us can provide for ourselves, none of us gets a different God staring back at us.

Quail are sent in the evening and then manna falls in the morning. It comes with strange instructions: gather only what you need for the day. Try to hoard it, and it rots by morning. On the sixth day, gather double, because the seventh is rest, and even rest is provided for, not earned.

Manna is not a wage. Nobody works for it. It isn't something Israel can bank, ration, or leverage over each other. The Hebrew word itself literally means "what is it?" They don't even have a name for what's falling from the sky, because they've never related to provision this way before. In Egypt, provision came from Pharaoh, in exchange for their labor and their submission. In the wilderness, God is teaching them an entirely different relationship: daily, personal, and impossible to control or corner. They are learning to trust rather than to earn.

That is the same grammar of the vineyard, too. The landowner's wage was never really wages at all. It was gift, wrapped up like a paycheck so the workers could receive it without shame. One more example of intimate grace found in these stories. And Paul knows how hard this way of living is to sustain alone, which might be why, writing to the Philippians, he doesn't just tell

them to “stand firm”. The word he uses adds the Greek prefix "para": alongside, beside, with. This new way of being human isn't about climbing on top of anyone, securing ourselves against being hurt, or winning some contest of worthiness. It's about standing shoulder to shoulder, one spirit, one mind, receiving the same undeserved provision together.

Paul even redefines the word "worthy" for us. It doesn't mean earning enough merit points. It means living a life that corresponds to, that's in congruence with, the gift we've already been given. Living this unmerited way does not come naturally to us. This is the way of the Kingdom, which stands in contrast to human systems. Things that don't come naturally require some real intention. And the discipline that sustains this new kind of life, according to the Psalmist, is communal praise. Our Psalm says, “give thanks, sing, seek, remember, together, out loud, and repeatedly”. We don't hold onto this new economy through willpower. We hold onto it by practicing gratitude in each other's company, often enough that comparison starts to lose its grip.

Paul also warns the Philippians not to read opposition as abandonment. Living this way towards God and one another, refusing the world's hierarchy of merit and reward, will cost us something, because it conflicts with a world built almost entirely on the economy the first workers were defending. That cost isn't a sign we're doing faith wrong. This antithetical way of living cost Jesus his life. Opposition can, in fact, be a sign we're doing faith right. Which is exactly why we need each other, standing *para*, alongside, and not alone. Together we remind ourselves, and one another, that God hears our cries, and together we find God's provision to be sufficient each new day.

In a few minutes we'll come to this table, where none of us pays anything close to what we're given, and where the person kneeling beside us receives precisely the same Christ as we do, whether they arrived on time or late. So... May we be a people who let go of the evil eye, who stop measuring grace and start receiving it together, standing alongside one another, generous because we have first been so generously fed.

