

## **Kingdom Economics: Earning Wages**

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on September 24, 2017  
on Matthew 20:1-16 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

One of my favorite interpreters of life and faith is the author Glennon Doyle Melton; I've shared some of her stories with you before. One classic essay that she wrote several years ago goes a little something like this:

"People are always asking me: "Glennon, Why are other mothers so judgmental? How do I escape from all the mom-petition?" My answer is always this: If you need it to disappear, stop believing in it. Competition is just like shame. It only exists for people who believe it does. I used to believe in mom-petition so strongly that it left me more than a bit paranoid. I remember sitting in the food court of the mall one afternoon when my three kids were very young. I was cutting cardboard pizza ... into itty bitty pieces, wiping up a million sugary spills, sweating, sweating, sweating, trying to figure out if I could be arrested for leaving my kids' side for one hot second to refill my coke.

Out of the blue this woman sat down at the table next to me with her quiet child. The child wore a matching top and pants. With a matching bow in her braid. In her BRAID. Someone had BRAIDED this child. While I stared and then looked back at my ragamuffin children who sort of looked like nobody loved them — the woman pulled out a high chair cover. To protect her child from GERMS, I think. And then. And THEN. Sister pulled an avocado out of her bag. An avocado AND A SPOON. This woman had

packed a spoon. And she used that spoon to start feeding her well-groomed child food that came from a TREE. Or the ground? I don't know — where do avocados come from? I'm pretty sure it's not from the food court.

And this mama's SHOW made my face start burning. I felt as if this woman had materialized for the sole reason of making me look bad. I am telling you that I decided right then and there that this mother was feeding her child avocados AT ME. And that also she had matched her child's clothes that morning AT ME. And also that she had likely disciplined her child effectively for years AT ME. And that as icing on her (likely homemade and gluten-free) cake she was enjoying a lovely, peaceful, well-planned, healthy lunch AT ME. I felt judged. I felt like her approach to parenting was maybe developed solely to shine a big old spotlight on my "not good enough" parenting. She was parenting AT ME, I tell you!"<sup>1</sup> It's only appropriate that Glennon titled this essay, "Quit Pointing Your Avocado at Me!"

It feels so familiar, doesn't it, this sense of competition and comparison that we hold with one another? When left to our own devices, we can't help but to notice what others are doing around us, seeing everything from their success in life to their success in food court parenting. Even the anger and shame and insecurity that follows is

---

<sup>1</sup> Glennon Doyle Melton, "Quit Pointing Your Avocado at Me," <http://momastery.com/blog/2013/06/21/quit-pointing-your-avocado-at-me/>

familiar, surfacing when all of a sudden, we notice how what someone **else** is doing or getting or achieving makes us feel about our **own** doing or getting or achieving. We rock along in our world, mostly doing just fine with all that fills it — a house, a job, a direction, family, friends, a style, a set of hobbies, a salary — but then we start to see what **other** people have and suddenly, we feel like we're falling behind:

*My neighbor has more square feet in their house than I do. That girl I knew from high school likes her job better than I like mine - or at least all she ever does is brag about it on Facebook. That start-up business capitalized on my idea first, and they're making it big! I wish my family was as supportive of me as my best friend's family is to her. And while we're at it, did you see all the fun things my coworker's friends do together? They seem far more fun than my own friends. Ugh - if only I had the style that guy with all the followers on Instagram has. Why can't I have any interesting hobbies like Lee Anne who clogs, Scott who builds beautiful furniture, or Dick whose paintings make me swoon? My salary seems reasonably fair, but then I found out that the guy over there who does the same job as me (and frankly works less than I do!) is making nearly 25% more in his annual salary than me — how is THAT fair?*

And all of a sudden, we find ourselves standing at the back of the line, necks craning to compare our apples with our neighbors' avocados, poisoned by the bitter entitlement that comes when we start stacking ourselves up with others.

It's at the back of the line where we meet Jesus today, telling yet another parable that seems to upend all expectations and teach a new kind of economics lesson. "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner," Jesus said, "who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." He found some, agreed with them on a fair daily wage — one denarius was enough to meet one's basic needs, and sent them into the vineyard. But then he went out again — at 9:00, noon, 3:00, and even 5:00 just an hour before night fell — each time returning relentlessly to where the laborers waited, hiring more and more to work in his vineyard. The text doesn't tell us if the work was just that plentiful, or if the 6am workers couldn't hack it, or if the landowner was bored and lonely! All we know is upon each return of the landowner to the marketplace, he sees those who haven't been chosen, those who have been overlooked, those without the dignity or the resources that come with work, and he plucks them up with the promise of just reward for their labor.

But when the time came to pay his workers, the landowner instructed his manager to call together all the workers, then pay first the most recent hires. The 5:00 hire got one denarius — as did the 3:00 hire, the noon hire, the 9:00 hire, even the 6:00 hire! "Not fair!," they cried. "We've toiled all day, sweating, sweating, sweating, and you pay us the same as you do the workers who have barely even gotten started?" "Wait just a moment," the landowner mused. "Didn't I pay you what we agreed

would be fair? Can't I do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Ouch. It stings because, quite frankly, we are envious. We get that old saying that "comparison is the thief of joy." And for those of us who generally follow the directions, and adhere to the practices of our Christian faith, and do unto others as we'd have them do unto us, and show up for Sunday School and Wednesday night and worship and committee meetings with our Bibles AND our offering envelopes AND a smile, we even find ourselves resentful of the grace God so freely shares with all God's children who didn't follow those rules but are loved and welcomed anyways.

"Are you envious because I am generous?," the landowner says. Are you envious because I paid the last the same as the first? Are you envious because I brought the robe and the ring, the fatted calf and the best party joyfully to that son of mine who was lost but now is found? Are you envious that I fling seeds lavishly and wastefully on the ground, knowing some can't possibly take root? Are you envious that I ran after that one sheep who got away and left behind the 99 who were following directions? Are you envious that I proclaimed blessing to the poor, the meek, the lowly, the merciful, those who mourn and are hungry, those who wage peace and those trapped by war? Are you envious that my daily bread

comes to y'all and not just you, even you who made sure to earn every morsel of it? "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."<sup>2</sup>

He had already mentioned this great reversal to the disciples just a few moments prior, of course. You remember the passage. "How can I inherit eternal life?," the rich young man asked. "I keep all the commandments, I follow the rules. What am I missing?" To which Jesus responded, "go sell everything you have and give that money to the poor. That's when your priorities will shift, and that's when you should come and follow me." Just imagine what was racing through his mind as he turned away grieving, for the rich man loved his possessions. "Many who are first will be last," Jesus said, "and the last will be first."<sup>3</sup>

Another great entertainer-parent is comedian Louis C. K. He's better known for his raucous humor than his real wisdom, but every now and again, he has these little nuggets of truth about the human condition that pierce the comedic exterior. One such nugget came in a scene from his show called "Louie," in which he and his daughter are in conversation. He had just made dinner and smoothies for his two daughters, and offered the last slice of mango to his older girl.

The younger was, of course, hot with anger. "But daddy!," his daughter whined, "she got a mango popsicle and I didn't!" (She apparently missed the memo that a hunk of fruit on a fork does not a popsicle make!)

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Campbell, "Matthew 20:1-16," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p97.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 19:16-22

Lots of "but daddy's!" resound in that kitchen, each one punctuated by an even louder "that's not fair!" "Who said anything about fair?," Louie finally asks her, his voice full of curiosity. "You were just fine without it until she got it. What's the problem?" "If she gets one, I should get one too," the daughter demanded.

And in the midst of the whining and the stirring and the fateful mango popsicle on a fork, Louie crouches down to meet her eyes and says this: "Look," he says, "the only time you look in your neighbor's bowl is to make sure that they have enough. You don't look in your neighbor's bowl to see if you have as much as them." Then he turns back to the stove and his girl leaves in a stunned silence.<sup>4</sup>

Sisters and brothers, in the economy of the kingdom, God's generosity is as lavish as a day's pay for an hour's work, as persistent as a landowner who can't stop hiring until everyone is employed, as unexpected as the last who become first, as humbling as bowls indiscriminately overflowing with abundance. What might happen, then, if we celebrated this generosity and anyone to whom it fell? Instead of finding ways to situate ourselves in competition with others, what would it feel like to give thanks for the gifts of God we see in other people's talents or parenting or families or jobs? Instead of always comparing our portion with our neighbor's, what if we looked around the table to see who is

---

<sup>4</sup> Louis C.K., "A Little Girl's Lesson in Fairness," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNo\\_Hhm5r8o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNo_Hhm5r8o)

missing? Instead of feeling consumed with resentment and entitlement when others are strong where we are weak, what if we celebrated these places as corners where we lean more heavily on God?

Once Glennon quit looking at the avocado in her neighbor's bowl, she began to wonder about those avocados in general — specifically the workers who picked them, the labor conditions under which they toiled, the abuse and neglect they experienced each day, their bowls always far from full. She lives in Florida, you see, in a comfortable and safe neighborhood. But her neighbors in the next town over are farm workers, some undocumented, all whose days sound very much like the workers who filled our parable's vineyard. Compelled by compassion instead of competition or comparison, Glennon decided to go down the road to Immokolee to meet her laborer neighbors.

There, she learned about those who arise before dawn to go and wait in the parking lots of the grocery store or the hardware store, just hoping that someone will come and hire them. Should they be hired, they can provide food for their family that night. If not, they will wait and wait and wait, and end the night hungry. "What might happen," Glennon wondered, "if I could hand over the microphone I've been given to these workers, so that their voices might be amplified, their story might be heard, their hunger for justice satisfied?" That wondering will come to life on the stage this fall, in a nationwide tour of speakers and leaders who seek to tell the story of a generous God whose grace is as lavish and



persistent as a landowner who leaves no one behind. And maybe - just maybe - God's justice might come for the last as it has so often for the first.<sup>5</sup>

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "God is not fair, but depending on where you are in line that can sound like powerful good news, because if God is not fair then there is a chance we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it through doors even though we are last in line—not because of who we are but because of who God is. God is not fair; God is generous and when we begrudge that generosity it is only because we have forgotten where we stand. On any given day of our lives, when the sun goes down and a cool breeze stirs the dusk, when the work is done and the steward heads toward the end of the line to hand out the pay, there is a very good chance that the cheers and back-slapping, the laughter and gratitude with which he will be greeted will turn out to be our own."<sup>6</sup>

That, my friends, is the lineup of the kingdom of God, where everyone - everyone - has a place and a purpose. Amen!

---

<sup>5</sup> I heard Glennon Melton refer to her friendship with Lupe here: <http://momastery.com/blog/2017/05/10/first-the-pain-then-the-rising/> and read more about her visit to Immokalee here: <http://www.ciw-online.org/blog/2017/07/u-s-soccer-legend-abby-wambach-ny-times-best-selling-author-activist-glennon-doyle-melton-visit-immokalee-to-talk-fair-food-program-ending-violence-against-women/>

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, pp. 79-80.