

“God’s Wildly Gracious Labor Market”

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Jonah 3:10-4:11
Matthew 20:1-16

The United Auto Workers are currently staging targeted strikes to demand better contracts.

Are you one who eagerly awaits the fall lineup of newly written TV shows? Well, cue up the re-runs, because The Writers’ Guild of America and the Screen Actor’ Guild are striking to demand fair compensation and for protection against the looming threat of AI, so it may be a while before those shiny new shows come to your living room TV screen.

CoFiA– which stands for Committee of Friends in Action– is a group of neighbors supporting neighbors in Palisades Park and neighboring boroughs, supporting neighbors through the many challenges immigration brings up. One of their ongoing actions is to advocate for immigrants who are day laborers, and are hired by people who do not pay the promised wage at the end of the day.

Labor is having a moment, and hopefully it will change the nature of our work for the better.

Usually, labor movements protest the practice of giving unfair wages and working conditions. For example, no bathroom breaks. A pension that suddenly gets revoked. Stingy wages for hourly paid workers, while executives see their wages grow in multitudes. Unequal pay for women who do the same work as men.

The MIT Living Wage calculator estimates that in Bergen County, the wage needed for a single adult to pay for necessities like rent, transportation, food, and clothing is \$19.46. If it is a single person working to support a spouse and child, that living wage needed goes up to \$36.35. But minimum wage here is \$14.13. We can assume that many households struggle to make ends meet in an economy like ours; in fact, we see them participating in many of the different services our church offers. Our church membership includes households like this.

In Jesus’ time, a denarius was a measure of currency that would have been considered a living wage. One denarius was considered a living wage for a day of work. So when Jesus tells a story of a householder who went looking in the market at the early start of the day for laborers for his vineyard, we know that the agreed-upon wage, one denarius, is a fair wage. It is a living wage. And the workers agree, and come to work. A few hours later, the householder returns to the market and recruits a few more workers who are standing in the market with no work to do. He promises to pay them a just wage– but doesn’t specify how much. Then he returns to the market, a couple hours later, and gets more workers, and again says, “I will pay you justly.” It

happens 2 more times, each batch of workers coming later and later with the last batch coming at the end of the day— just before the householder gathers everyone to pay them for their work.

The parable never says why, but I wonder why the householder keeps finding laborers at the market who are standing idly, with no work to do. Commentator Debie Thomas suggests it's "because no one would hire them. Perhaps they weren't as literate, educated, or skilled as their competition. Perhaps they had children to care for at home. Maybe they had transportation difficulties. Maybe they were disabled, or didn't have greencards, or suffered discrimination. Whatever the case may be, the landowner doesn't ask these laborers to defend themselves. He just makes sure that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage — the capacity to go home that night and feed their family."

And then, for some reason, the householder makes a show of paying the last ones to arrive at the vineyard, first. He could have done it the other way around: paid the early arrivers first, with their agreed upon wage. They would have gone home and not witnessed the scandal of what happens next. But he does it the other way around. He pays the *latecomers* first, each of them a denarius- a living wage for an entire day. We can guess the ones who got there earlier started getting itchy palms as they imagined their own payment in proportion to what the latecomers received. Enough for a goat to roast and throw a party with their neighbors! So we can all empathize with their disappointment when they were paid only what they were promised and no more: one denarius each. A day's pay, for a day's work.

Is it fair? The workers who had spent the whole day don't seem to think so, and they grumble about it. The householder asks them, "Are you envious because I am generous?" The Greek translation is a bit more colorful: "Is your eye evil, because I am good?"

This is the economics of God's labor market. Everyone gets enough for what they need. Some will have earned it. Some will not have earned it, but still they go home with enough. God's disbursement of generosity? Well, it's a bit of a scandal. The parable ends with this line: "The last will be first, and the first will be last."

The householder asked the grumbling laborers a good question: "Is your eye evil, because I am good?" This question could have been asked to Jonah as well. The whole reason Jonah refused to go to Nineveh in the first place was because he *knew* Nineveh was evil, and he wanted no good to come to them. Jonah also knew that God had a reputation, as Jonah repeated a line that appears throughout the Torah: "You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment." In Jonah's eye, this was *not* a good thing. Jonah would rather see a little fire and brimstone flung in the direction of his enemies. God's mercy toward Nineveh distraught Jonah so much that he begged God to take his life from him, "for it is better for me to die than to live."

I'm not sure **what** specifically made the people of Nineveh so evil. We know from other books of the bible that Nineveh was associated with occupying empires, first Assyria, then Babylon. But the bible doesn't go into detail for why God was concerned about Nineveh in Jonah's time,

except that they didn't know their right from their left. I'm guessing that in Jonah's time, the right hand was used for eating and grasping another's hand, and the left hand was used for bodily purposes that weren't so clean, in a time where you could not find easy access to running water.

I am left-handed, and also have been known to mix up left and right when giving directions. So I hope that God's judgment of Nineveh would not have included me!

Nineveh is where the city Mosul in Iraq now stands, on the shores of the Tigris River in Mesopotamia. As I was researching this scripture passage, a fact I had never known before jumped out at me: "The name Nina was used also by the goddess Ishtar, whose worship was the special cult of Nineveh... The [cuneiform] ideogram for Nineveh is a fish enclosed in the sign for house, possibly indicating a fish-pond, sacred to Ishtar."¹ As I consider this, that the goddess Ishtar was shown by the sign of a fish, it occurs to me that the part of the story where Jonah gets swallowed by a fish might be a reference to the goddess Ishtar, whom the people of Nineveh would have worshiped. *Could it be possible that God was not only working through Jonah, but also through the local goddess traditions, to help the people of Nineveh change their evil ways?* All Jonah had to say is, "Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown!" and immediately all the people changed their ways, and wore sackcloth and ash to show their remorse for their misdeeds. Even the animals wore sackcloths! I have never preached such an impactful sermon, I'm afraid. But if the people of Nineveh heard that Jonah had been burped out of the belly of the goddess herself, then no wonder they listened to his pathetic sermon and immediately changed their ways!

The ways God goes about giving gifts of mercy and love aren't ours to manage or resist, only to enjoy and extend to others. But we are so conditioned by the unfairness of the world, that we think that if God shows love or mercy to someone else, it will take away from the love God has for us. Whether you have sat unnoticed in a classroom while your teacher heaps praise on a favored student, or you have been passed over for a promotion for someone who "fits" with the company's values— in other words, their culture and race matches that of those at the top, you see how the world tells us to grab hold of what we have and save it for ourselves alone. The world teaches our eyes to look through a lens of scarcity. But God's message is different. It may not seem fair according to our measures, which pit us against what our neighbor has.

But unlike the world's unfairness, God's fairness lifts others up, rather than pushes them down to the lowest common denominator. God's grace is not like a pie that gets smaller and smaller with each slice that is given away. Instead, it is more like a joke that gets funnier and funnier the more people hear it and laugh from it and repeat it to others.]

God's wildly generous labor market opens our eyes in a way that helps us see generously, rather than look for how we can push others down so we can come out on top. It helps us to envision ways that the last can be first and the first will be last, but no matter where you are in the line, there is still room for all. So let us revel in God's mercy rather than resent its

¹ "Ninevah" in *Theodora Encyclopedia*

promiscuity. Let us give rather than grab. Let us labor with love for *all* whom God invites into this holy vineyard.