

The Usual Daily Wage

If you have ever been in any bible study groups or any book clubs, you probably learned an interesting fact: everyone reads the same text, but we all have different interpretations. Depending on your own experience, your education, your current situation, where you are in your life and your faith, your understanding of the Bible will vary. For example, those who have been seriously ill have a different understanding about sickness and healing in the stories of the Gospels than those who have never been seriously ill. Those who have experienced failure in their lives have a different understanding of the many biblical stories of failure and redemption, from Abraham and David to the disciples than those, if any, who have never failed. Those who have ever worked or lived in other countries or who have immigrated to Canada have a different understanding about biblical cross-cultural encounters than those who don't have such experiences.

As you know, I am from South Korea, and have lived in Canada for less than five years. I like living in Canada; I love nature, fresh air and clean water, and I think that the public school system and health care in Canada are good, though I don't know the details. But I often find myself learning to walk like a toddler; I speak English as a second language, which makes me insecure, because I don't know very simple words that even kindergarten kids know; I don't know anything about the politics of Canada or the constitution of Canada; I don't know much about Canadian history or current affairs. In fact, I am neither a landed immigrant nor a Canadian, so I don't have the rights and privileges that landed immigrants and Canadians have; I applied for immigration in 2007 and my application is still being processed; I don't know when I can get a permanent residency visa, so until then, I have to renew my status in Canada every once in a while, because I am, officially, a temporary foreign worker, and a spouse of a full-time international student. The tenuousness of my status in Canada, ironically, makes me very thankful for my work and my life in Canada. After coming to Canada, everything that I took for granted in Korea was gone, so I had to learn how to make something of myself,

how to follow my heart, and how to live my life with grace. Even if I work for only one year, one month, one week, one day or one hour, I don't want to lose the joy of working, and I want to live fully with gratitude. That is, I think, the same hope that the workers who were waiting to be hired in the vineyard had in today's story.

Have any of you ever done any manual labour? I have done it before. Right after I finished my military duty in Korea, I was ready for anything. I thought manual labour would be easy for me, because that's what I usually did at my military base. But it did not take too long to realize that manual labour is one of the hardest, most unappreciated jobs in the world. I woke up at five o'clock in the morning and took a bus to go to a job placement office by six o'clock. On the first day, I was so surprised that so many people were already there, waiting to be called by name while they were wearily watching TV. Some of them were half-asleep, and looked like they had been there all night long. It was not hard to see that most of them earned their living by doing manual labour. If they were not hired, they might not have been able to feed their family. So it was crucial for them to be hired, and to get paid the usual amount for a day's work. In reality, however, not all of them were hired, and those who were the first to arrive were not always the first served; the more experienced, skilled and strong workers had more chances to be hired, and if it was a rainy day, there were fewer work opportunities than on a sunny day, with more competition for the few available positions.

But that's not the case in today's story, because the labourers in the parable have a very generous and peculiar employer, a landowner of a vineyard. The landowner seems not interested in who can work most effectively, instead he is interested in hiring as many labourers as possible. That's why he keeps coming back to hire at nine o'clock in the morning, at eleven o'clock, at three o'clock, and finally at five o'clock in the afternoon. And surprisingly, everyone receives the same amount, a full daily wage, regardless of their working hours. The landowner has no interest in the prosperity of his business, but in making an alternative community, in which everyone should be treated equally, can claim the joy of working, and be assured of the minimum cost of living. What the workers need to remember is that it is a gift to be hired, to be called, and that gift goes to

everyone. Notice who is grumbling - it's the first workers, of course, because they worked so much more than the last. They complain because the landowner makes them equal to the last. What the first workers forget is how they started working; they would have been the last if the landowner did not call. And it's the usual daily wage agreement that the landowner made with the first workers, after all. The same usual daily wage that everyone gets paid is a reminder of how their day began, and an invitation for all the workers to think that "your needs are the same as mine".

I said at the beginning of my sermon, that everyone's understanding of the Bible is coloured by their own life experiences. I have a question for you, and I know that there will be very many different answers: Who do you identify with in this story? Do you identify yourself with the first, the middle or the last? For me, I now identify myself with the last workers, who were hired near the close of day, very new to the vineyard, and I realize that when I was in Korea, I was like the first, who worked hard all day, but forgot the grace that enabled them to labour abundantly. As I reflect on my life, now I understand that it is the same grace of God that enables me to live and to work whether I am like the first or the last. The first and the last are equally blessed, and both of them are equally invited to work together to build a more loving and caring community.

As you know, our church decided to sponsor a Palestinian refugee family along with the help of many other churches and communities. I am so proud of you. When we committed ourselves to be an official sponsor, I felt God's presence deeply in our worship, in presentation, in free discussion and in decision making. I was so moved by your faithful responses. I can tell you that the Spirit is alive here in everyone's heart now. Our church community is like the vineyard, where diverse people work together, but unlike the story, everyone is asking the landowner to bring a new member to our midst, because we know that God's grace is meant to be shared with everyone. We need grace every day just like God's people in the desert depended on the bread that the Lord granted them every day. And God's grace, just like the usual daily wage, is steadfast and always the same for everyone - for you, for me, and for Yousif, Noor and baby Mohammad.