

Proper 20A  
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*As It Should Be*

On restless nights, I often put on my headphones and find a podcast to listen to until my mind and body relaxes enough to ease me into sleep. On one such recent night, an episode of *This American Life* had the exact opposite effect on me. It unsettled me to the point I wasn't sure I would ever fall asleep during that long night. The episode told the story of an exchange program between University Heights, a 97% Hispanic and African American High School in the South Bronx, one of the poorest school districts in the entire country and Fieldston Academy, a prestigious New York City private school with a 70% white student body. These two schools were only three miles apart; but the students needed this opportunity in order to be exposed to each other's different worlds. Their teachers Ms. Greenbaum and Ms. Vassos didn't think it would be that big of a deal to bring their kids together. But the public-school teacher said that the moment her kids got off the bus at Fieldston, they had a dramatic reaction to what they saw. They felt completely out of place and uncomfortable as they stepped onto the sprawling campus. One particular University Heights student, the teachers recall, had a surprising response. She started screaming. Her face went completely white. They worried she was going to pass out. "I don't want to be here," she cried. "Get me home."

This student was considered one of the exceptional ones at University Heights. She was bright and confident. Everyone believed she was going to make it- go off to college and find her way out of the seemingly endless cycle of poverty she was raised in. Melanie graduated high school early and seemed to drop off the face of the earth. One of her teachers believed she had received a scholarship to Middlebury College, but hadn't heard anything from her since her high school days. No one had heard anything from Melanie for years. The reporter eventually tracked her down only miles from her Bronx school. She was working two jobs while taking night classes. Melanie said her teacher was right. She had applied for that competitive scholarship to Middlebury. And she had made it all the way to the final round of interviews before receiving the rejection letter. So, close, she said to realizing her dream.

The reporter asked Melanie about that moment when she stepped off the bus and onto the campus of Fieldston. Melanie said that this was the kind of place she had envisioned her high school would be like. "This is what I wanted for myself, what I had expected for myself." And then it hit her hard. This place was not for kids like her. Separated by a just few miles, she and her fellow classmates lived a world apart from

the Fieldston students. This awareness overwhelmed her. And as the reporter reflected, "It seemed that the people around her must believe that this was the natural order of things. Melanie knew there was no innate difference between her and a kid born into wealth. She could see that this division we're all so inured to was not a reflection of her inferior worth or ability, she just didn't know what to do with the idea that she might be alone in seeing that." And so, she wept.

I was unsettled, undone by this story. I feel like I have a pretty good awareness of my own privilege or at least it's something I'm trying to come to terms with. And then I hear about Melanie and I can't help but think about the distance between her life and mine, between her world and mine as a white, educated woman who lives in the relative safety and comfort of a middle-class suburb. There is no innate difference between me and the Melanies of our world. She is no less worthy, no less capable or no less valuable than I am. And yet, there's no denying it. I live in a world of privilege and she does not. I live in a world that has given me opportunities to be and do anything I want. She has not. As much as I want to get rid of the huge gap between us, as much as I pray that we should get rid of the huge gap, it still exists. In Melanie's story, I had to confront this painful reality while also protesting against it. Maybe this really is the way things are; but I know deep down inside it's not the way things should be.

Mark Twain said, "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture which they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand." The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is pretty darn clear. Jesus puts up a mirror before us, challenging us to see things as they really are, as difficult and uncomfortable and unsettling as they may be. The parable exposes and unmask the many ways we operate out of places of privilege and entitlement. "If this parable doesn't offend us at least a little bit, then we're not paying attention," writes essayist Debie Thomas. "After all, we know how the world is supposed to work. Time is money, and fair is fair... But God — if the landowner in this parable represents God — is *not* fair. At least, not according to our cherished beliefs about fairness. This God, it turns out, does not believe that the best place to be is at the front of the line. He isn't interested, as we so often are, in showing favor to the best and the biggest and the brightest — the workers with the most elite educations, astonishing professional achievements, or fanciest zip codes. This God is not obsessed with who deserves what. In fact, he doesn't even ask why some workers were able to start at dawn and others were not. All that he's obsessed with is making sure that every last person gets a place in his vineyard — the early bird *and* the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirm, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten... "

It's interesting to me that in the parable the landowner doesn't pay the all-day laborers first and then let them go home before he pays those who only worked at the end of the day. This would have been so much easier for him. There would have been no grumbling. Instead, the landowner wants them all, the early birds and latecomers to see what kind of vineyard he operates. He closes the gap between *the haves* and *the have nots* through his generosity. And he desires all who have been welcomed into his vineyard to give up their envy and their entitlement, and share in this generosity. Through his words and actions Jesus dares us to see ourselves and one another as he sees us. Again, and again, Jesus turns our assumptions about how the world works upside down. He flips the world order, *the last shall be first and the first shall be last*, so that we can experience the way of our generous, loving, gracious God and His Kingdom, a place where all are given the opportunity to flourish.

Theologian Karl Rahner writes, "The curved lines of story and parable show us ourselves in perhaps not such a good light—but ultimately one that shines itself on our condition and awakens us to the love that stands behind this immeasurable gift." In story and parable we encounter the truth, sometimes the hard and painful truth about ourselves and our world so that we can awaken to the immeasurable gift of God's love freely given to us and to all. We have been given a vision of a world as it should be, as it can be, a world where there are no divisions, no gaps, no haves and have nots, a world where no one is forgotten or left behind, where the early birds and the latecomers are welcomed equally. The good news is that we get to participate in this world. We get to help Jesus make it our new reality, so that all of us and especially all of the Melanies may never feel again that they don't belong. Amen.

