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We have been in our new world, the world of Covid-19, for six months now. I want us to journey back to mid-March when schools closed, nursing homes locked down, we stopped meeting for worship, everything that was deemed non-essential closed, and everyone except medical and essential workers stayed home. During those few weeks of lock down we got to know who the essential workers were, both because our government leaders told us and because we saw who was still out and about while everyone else was home.

A group of workers that were surprised to hear they were essential were people that worked in grocery stores and pharmacies. My sister works for Walgreens, and overnight, she was an important essential worker, an essential worker making \$10.25 an hour after working for Walgreens for 16 years. When everyone was home, she was working 50 hours a week in a store dealing with stressed out people yelling at her because the store was sold out of hand sanitizer. And again, she makes \$10.25 an hour. In order to make rent on a one bedroom and pay all your bills each month, the *Chicago Tribune* states that one needs to make \$17 an hour to live comfortably. And this is not my sister's only job. She also is a paraprofessional at Chicago Public Schools, working full time there as well, and she makes the \$17 an hour at that job but no more. She needs the side hustle, the extra job, because she has two special-needs boys—one with a behavioral disability and one on the autism spectrum. She needs the extra money because the boys have extra needs. But really, she is also needed at home more often as well to set up much-needed routines and give her boys support.

This is the plight of the working poor—people who make below a living wage yet work full time hours, often more. They work long hours at a job that doesn't challenge them, where they are treated badly by customers and by their employer as well. My sister has worked for Walgreens for 16 years and makes \$10.25 an hour. But the factory my parents worked at and made a true living wage, not more, but a living wage with one job, that factory is no longer there. The jobs are gone. The workers are there and willing to work, but there are very few jobs that actually pay them to live and work.

Six months ago when the world shut down overnight, everything was scary, and everything felt huge. People lost jobs. My other sister is a waitress and has not worked since March 12. There is no work for her. She is not lazy; there are simply no restaurants hiring, and she has a newborn at home. We are in a pandemic, and it is safest for many of us to remain at home. That is why I spent the week learning how to create a video of the worship service. It is not a skill I thought I would need when I went to seminary to learn to be a pastor, but in 2020, it is very much a needed skill. It is safer to stay home. People need to get really creative with making ends meet.

Thirty-six percent of US households had a drop in income since mid-march ([https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA308-3.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA308-3.html)). Families and individuals need to figure out ways to pay housing and utility bills. Some are choosing to use credit cards and just succumb to the fact that they will always have a debt load. They are taking to Etsy to sell homemade products. They are standing in lines at food

pantries. The pandemic has made life harder for everyone, but the financial issues of the pandemic are hitting each family in very individual ways, most of them negative.

The pandemic is teaching us that our current economic system does not work for most of the people—having healthcare connected to employers, then having millions of people file for unemployment and also lose their health care on the same day. At the same time, a virus is killing hundreds of thousands of people and causing many more to go into the hospital where they end up with hospital bills they cannot pay, even if they survive, adding to the debt load they already cannot handle. We in the US claim to be a capitalistic society. We have a capitalistic system of economy that we like to boast about until something like a pandemic happens, and we realize just how unstable our system of capitalism is. This is what makes me think about this parable Jesus tells his disciples.

In the US we have this belief that people get paid for the work they put in. That is why people who run companies get paid more than people who work in the stores. People with medical degrees, which take years to get, make more money. We like to lift up people who make a lot of money. We make them famous and give them credit for their hard work, yet the pay gap between CEO and the lowest wage earner in a company has grown 1,007% since the 1970s (<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/16/ceos-see-pay-grow-1000percent-and-now-make-278-times-the-average-worker.html>).

CEOs now make 278 times more than their employees make a year. There is a huge wealth divide in our country, and it is getting harder to make excuses for it. And it is our willingness to glorify wealth and link it to the quality of a person that makes it hard to hear this parable without getting defensive. We want to respond to Jesus that the people who worked longer hours deserve to be paid for their time. We have his want of equality in our society. We have ideals on what kind of work is worth what kind of money. This conversation happens every three or four years with the Chicago Public School teacher contracts. We get annoyed that teachers are asking for more money, and we call them names, call them undeserving. Yet we never have a public conversation about the worth of other professions and jobs. Until Covid. Then all the essential workers who were feeding us, making our food, and taking care of us were making poverty wages, and we cried that it was unfair—but only for a few weeks. Amazon responded to unsafe working conditions by giving a worker bonus that was short lived, yet their CEO is making billions during the pandemic.

We are living a real life example of this parable. People are working hard and not getting paid what they deserve while others get paid more than they worked for if we look at it purely from a financial viewpoint. Yet for Jesus, parables used stories about situations to lift up the way God works in the world.

In our reading of the gospel we are quick to find God and find ourselves in parables. To quote a reflection from Dr. Stanly Suthers, professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, “Why have so many readers in the history of the church wanted to make this landowner into a God-figure? Why do we so often think that the power figures—whether kings, landowners, or fathers—represent divine authority? Is God really like these? Or are they merely god-like in our mind’s eye? Why do so many of us still want to believe what the

powerful people say, even when it flies in the face of reality? The parable teaches us to read our world critically.”

The pandemic has forced us to also look at our world critically. Things we thought were fair and traditional no longer seem to be working. We have a new system of employment and a new way of handling money, yet our ways of operating haven't changed. Health insurance and retirement are still connected to our employers, yet many live and work in the newer gig economy and don't have access to employer healthcare or retirement packages. We look at things as fair and unfair, and we are unwilling to look at the in-between and see things another way.

Jesus wanted us to look at the world through many different perspectives, which is why he shared parables. In a parable we are able to place ourselves in the role of each character in the parable and try to understand the needs of each person.

In March, when the pandemic shut everything down, we saw the world through the eyes of essential workers. People making less than a living wage, working in unsafe conditions, and being the ones working to make sure we all are cared for. In March, prayers for these workers were all over. Here is an example of one: “Heavenly and Almighty God, who has all power and might to heal and protect. I pray today for the health and safety of all those on the frontlines of our fight against COVID-19. In particular, I pray for the doctors, nurses, and medical staff caring for the sick. Lord, protect them from exposure to this virus and keep them safe. Give them the strength to carry on each day, comforting their tired and weary hearts. Lord, I pray also for the first responders – police, firefighters, and paramedics – who keep us safe and continue to work in our communities. Keep them safe from the virus, so they can continue to serve and protect our cities. Lord, I also pray for the essential workers who didn't expect to be on the front lines. Protect our grocery workers, store clerks, truck drivers, those who produce our essential goods, and all others serving our communities. Lord, support and encourage them, and keep them protected from this virus. Lord, there are many heroes in this battle, although none greater than you. For we have no power to face this virus and its impacts on our own, Lord, so we fix our eyes on you. We will not be afraid. We will not be discouraged. For you, Lord, are with us every step of the way. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.” (<https://www.prayerandpossibilities.com/prayer-for-front-line-workers/>)

How quickly we forgot about their service during a scary time. This parable reminds us of the gifts of the kingdom and that God does not forget. God's kingdom is open for all. God's grace has no societal rules. All are invited and accepted no matter if you were born with parents that raised you in the church or you developed your relationship with God later in life. God is not quick to forget like we are; God is not quick to place people in a pecking order like we are.

This week's parable—the parable of the vineyard workers who are hired at different hours of the day—is a parable about the new vision of the kingdom of God! A kingdom in which the owner pays out a daily wage that seems totally unjust to some workers (those who worked all day) and totally unearned (those who worked just an hour) to others.

It seems to me that one lesson that Jesus consistently communicates with all of his “parables of the kingdom” is that the cause-and-effect realities of our world are not the realities of God’s kingdom. The rules of this world have absolutely nothing to do with the kingdom of God. If we try to use worldly causation to reason and draw conclusions about who God is and how God works, we are doomed to fail. As the theologian Ken Sundet Jones has written, this kingdom-of-the-world way of thinking creates a kind of Christian who tries to make the grace of God’s kingdom conform to the physics and math of the world.

But the way of God’s kingdom defies earthly logic, much like this pandemic has thrown many things we held true for a loop. Jesus teaches us that God does not keep score. God’s forgiveness and grace will not conform to any long held belief or idea, and new life and resurrection actually do come from death and the grave.

Amen