

Behind the Kitchen Door

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Readings

Matthew 20:1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last

From *Behind the Kitchen Door* by Saru Jayaraman:

Fair and equitable labor practices are extraordinarily rare in the restaurant industry. Restaurant workers hold 7 of the 10 lowest-paying occupations in the United States, earning less, on average, than farmworkers and all other domestic workers. Although the industry has grown steadily over the last 20 years, restaurant workers continue to earn significantly less than workers in almost every other industry. In 2010, the median wage for restaurant workers nationwide was \$9.02 an hour, including tips – a wage that leaves a family of four below the federal poverty line. In 2009, restaurant workers made, on average, \$15,092. Workers throughout the rest of the private sector made, on average, \$45,155.

The minimum wage system for tipped workers is totally dysfunctional. It's a system that permits and even encourages employers to underpay their employees, and forces us, the consumers, to try to make up the difference.

Sermon

Now and then you read a book that shifts your ideas about something you had taken for granted or not thought much about. *Behind the Kitchen Door* was such a book for me.

Just about everyone goes out to dinner at one time or another, whether to McDonalds or a four-star or something in between. But if we ourselves haven't been employed in a restaurant, what do we know about how the industry actually works? What do we know about how the workers are treated? What ought we to know about what goes on "behind the kitchen door" if we care not only about good food, but about justice and fairness as well?

Well... plenty.

And I, for one, know a lot more now than I did before I read the book.

You heard some important information in the second reading, the reality of how poorly paid most restaurant workers are.

Did you know, further, that the federal minimum wage for so-called tipped workers is \$2.13 an hour? Did you know that though restaurants are legally obliged to make up the difference between that minimum and the general federal minimum wage if tips have not made up the difference... does it surprise you that some restaurants don't do this? And though many states have a much higher minimum wage for tipped workers, did you know that Massachusetts is *not* among them, that in fact we have the lowest minimum wage for tipped workers in New England – only \$2.63?

And does it surprise you that though managers are not meant to share in the pooled tips, 13% of restaurant workers report that they do?

Did you know that many restaurants do not offer paid sick days to their workers, so wait staff and kitchen staff often work while sick because they really need the money and the job... but thereby endangering the health of... well, one another and we the diners?

Did you realize that there is often a racial divide, a color continuum you might say, from light-skinned to darker-skinned, as you move from what is called in the restaurant business the front of the house (the hosts and servers) to the back of the house (kitchen workers)?

Now, it's not that we should no longer go out to eat, knowing that we may be supporting a restaurant that treats its workers badly. In fact, maybe it is all the more important, if we can afford it, to have our night out – but to do so in a more informed way. I'll say a little more about that later, but first some deeper context for all of this.

To begin with: why did I choose that particular parable for our first reading this morning. Did I choose it because I believe the answer to economic injustice, whether in the hospitality industry or wherever, is that everyone should simply get the same wages no matter how long or how hard they've worked? I *have* been accused of being a socialist – which I don't necessarily entirely disavow – but if I am a socialist, equal wages whether or not you work a little or a lot would not be my kind of socialism.

What then about that parable?

Well, many traditional commentaries suggest that the parable is about God's kingdom in heaven, understanding heaven as some place you go after you die – the message being that whenever you repent, turn your life around, turn towards God, it is not too late, you will be paid your full "wages": which is to say salvation. And you shouldn't be upset that the latecomers get the same "wages">

But my theology of what Jesus called the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God” is much more this-worldly, at least on one level, at least to begin with. In other words, I believe that whatever Jesus may or may not have been teaching us about some next world, he was most certainly teaching us about this world, and how we ought to treat one another in this world, in this life. After all, elsewhere in the gospels Jesus talked quite directly about how we ought to treat the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, “the least of these” as he put it. Nothing otherworldly about that.

Also... Jesus was known to exaggerate to make a point.

So, the parable of the workers does not describe nor is it meant to describe some way to run an actual business. You wouldn’t get very far for very long following the practice of the owner in the parable. Who, after all, would want to work the whole day if you knew you’d get paid the same for a half day or for just an hour?

But as I said, Jesus was known to exaggerate to make a point, even to shock his listeners by turning conventional wisdom upside down – which he surely did in this parable.

I really like the parable, then, not because I think this is the way businesses and our economy ought to be managed, but because the parable is outrageous enough to get my attention and challenge me to think about how I treat people and why. Do people have to *earn* my attention, my care, my kindness... my fairness... and for a certain length of time or in a certain way? Or are human relationships in the this-worldly “kingdom of heaven” – the world as we would want it to be – not to be measured with a ledger or a balance sheet?

I know what my answer is, and I suspect yours is the same.

So then, what does the open-hearted, generous *spirit* to which the parable invites us have to do with the practical question of what fair treatment for restaurant workers... or anyone else for that matter... would look like?

One more angle of vision might help us answer this question of how to put our open-hearted, generous, kingdom of heaven spirit into practice in the what we call the real world of work and business as we seek fairness and justice.

Some of you may have heard of the philosopher John Rawls, who wrote a lot about justice. In fact, he wrote a very big book about justice, which I must confess I’ve never read. But I have read *about* his theory of justice, which has often been boiled down to this: How would you construct a society if you didn’t know what circumstance into which you would, by the luck of the genetic and circumstantial draw, be born?

Simple as that (to start anyway). And the assumption behind Rawls’ little mental exercise is that luck – circumstances beyond our personal control – has a huge part to play in our lives: concerning our health, our economic situation, our ethnic or racial background, our abilities and skills, natural disasters, and on and on. So, given that there is so much in our lives that has nothing to do with how hard we work or how “good” a person we are, how then would you construct the world so that it would be feel fair to you no matter what circumstance you were born into?

An interesting, evocative, and provocative exercise!

When it comes to restaurant workers, then, it is as simple as imagining, for example, how you would want to be treated if you were, say, a recent immigrant from a Latin American nation, poor, caring for an elderly parent and two small children, and trying to make it on your restaurant wages and tips. How would you want to be treated?

And if it takes a union or some other form of worker organization, or if it takes a law – a better minimum wage law for example – to get that fair treatment... (because those workers do not have the luxury of waiting until the managers and owners have a change of heart...), then so be it.

Now, I assume that all of us in this room would like our nation and the world to be a more just place. I also assume that all of us at least some of the time, and maybe most of the time, feel overwhelmed by the size and scope of injustice in the world.

I finally assume, then, that it's nice when we have something, maybe just one thing, that we can actually *do* to plant a seed of justice in relation to some injustice.

When it comes to justice in the restaurant industry, here are a *few* things we can each can do:

The short answer is you can begin by reading the book (which as it happens is our UUA “common read” this year)! And/or going to the web site of ROC United – Restaurant Opportunities Centers United – not exactly a union, but an association of restaurant workers designed to pressure the hospitality industry and individual restaurants in the direction of fair labor practices.

The longer answer as to what we can do is at the back of the book, which includes these among other suggestions – which I'm now mostly quoting:

Adopt for yourself a definition of “sustainable food” that includes sustainable and fair labor practices.

Talk to the workers when you eat in a restaurant. (I did this the other night actually, asking our server about the way tips were divided; it was illuminating, and she really appreciated the thoughtfulness of my even asking the question.)

Engage restaurant managers in a conversation about labor practices – pay, tips, sick days, etc. (I haven't done this yet, but I should – why not?) – and let them know your decision as to where to eat will have as much to do with the quality of labor practices as with the quality of the food.

One last thing we can all do when we get home today or tomorrow? Email or call your state senator and ask your senator to vote for the minimum wage bill coming up for a vote on Tuesday, and to vote as well for any amendments that would also increase the minimum wage for tipped workers.

Some of you may disagree with me and with the book on some of the specifics of this or that minimum wage or other restaurant labor practices – but surely we all want greater justice and fairness for those who serve us, our fellow citizens who happen to be sometimes on the other side of the table or behind the kitchen door.

Wouldn't we prefer, after all, to live in the spirit of Jesus' parable of the workers – that generous, open-hearted spirit – than in a cramped, purely ledger-based spirit? Yes, we need ledgers – but our lives are larger than ledgers.

Further and finally, our Unitarian Universalist second principle enjoins us to affirm and promote “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” That's all I'm talking about today – specifically in relation to restaurant workers, but in the end and in the spirit of our principles, in the spirit of Jesus, in the spirit of our heart's deepest call... justice, equity, and compassion for everyone.

May we each plant a seed, however small, every day – a seed of justice, equity, and compassion.

May it be so.

