

# *Crashing Economies*

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 20:1-19

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It is a dangerous thing to do Morgan was discovering. There is no time to make sure that the flimsy, aluminium ladder is situated securely into the tree before climbing it. You simply have to sort of toss it among the branches and trust them to cling to it then grip tightly as you make your way up bending and swaying with the give of the tree. If his goal was to be realized he would have to put his body on the line. Time is of the essence. You see Morgan was racing to fill a large, rubber tub about the size of a large bathtub with oranges he was picking. He started quite quickly picking from the ground enough oranges for one bottle of orange juice in about ten minutes. But once the low hanging fruit was done the ladder work began. From that precarious position he had to fill a sack slung around his shoulders with about 100 pounds of oranges, climb back down, empty it into the tub and go again. It would take 12 trips in all to fill that tub and he would be paid for that tub, \$9.00. Based on the amount of time it took him to fill it that comes out to \$2.25 per hour. You can see why he was in such a hurry as to warrant putting his body on the line or at least you could see why those who were working around him would. They are all, to a person, migrant workers mostly from Mexico, looking to feed their families and at that rate of pay they have to work every moment there is light to do so every day as quickly as they can.

Morgan's goal was different though. Picking oranges doesn't feed his family. Making movies does. Morgan Spurlock is a documentary film maker you've likely heard me talk about before and some of you have even seen a thing or two he's done with me. He was there that day to show us something. In part he was showing us what is required for me to be able to go to Wegman's and buy a bottle of orange juice for \$2.29. In so doing though, what Morgan was really showing us was what it looks like when two economies crash together.

I know that church seems an odd place to talk about economics, but you'll have to blame Matthew the gospel writer for that. You can't talk about his gospel, that is you can't talk about Jesus, without talking about economics. So here we go: in isolation we might expect the American economy to correct for the problem of \$2.25 hourly pay for workers. Few Americans are willing to work for that. Theoretically that would result in higher wages by demand, which in turn would mean much higher prices for juice. It is likely that in an isolated American economy orange juice would be a luxury item we would enjoy occasionally rather than a staple grocery item, but it isn't an isolated economy; it's very near another economy so rife with poverty and a population so in need that \$2.25 per hour at all hours is all there is. One implication of the economies of the U.S. and Mexico crashing together is that the value of juice is at about \$2.29 per bottle and the value of people is about \$2.25 per hour.

In the way this reality is interpreted though, there is evidence that there has been a crashing together of even greater economies than those of these two countries. Some, you know, will look on to the valuation of juice and the valuation of people and conclude that if that is what the market has deemed to be fair, then it is fair. Others will see workers from one place assuming paid work that rightfully belongs to workers from

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

another. They will conclude that is unfair. Still some of us will see such low wages as unfair. And you may have noticed, these conversations can become rather animated as they unfold on cable news or in stump speeches or in hearing rooms. We are divided as to what is fair and what is unfair and that is not because the economies of two *countries* have crashed into each other. It is because the economies of two *worlds* have crashed into each other – the same two economies that crashed into each other in that parable Jesus told us this morning.

Speaking of things that strike us as unfair, Jesus draws on a common practice for the first century of hiring day laborers to tend to the harvest in the vineyards. He tells the story of a man who hires his laborers very early in the morning and sets them to work for the agreed amount of one denarius. A bit later he hires more workers, and later again. Finally, he brings on more workers just before the day is through and when the time for reckoning comes he pays all of the laborers, regardless of how many hours they had logged, the same wage – one denarius. That's just not fair, and we (just as in the first century) feel the unfairness of the story heavily, because we hold the same assumption they did then – that a person's worth is tied to their production. We don't *say* that, but a quick look at what goods and resources tend to fall into which hands in this world will show that we *believe* it. It's this assumption that makes the fact that the man paid all the laborers the same so strange to us or makes us want to interpret the story as simply an example of an employer who was in a good mood one day.

Did you notice one peculiar thing though? There is never any mention in the text about the *need* for more workers. There is no hint that the harvest is taking longer than expected. Every time the vineyard owner recruits a new wave of workers he does so not because he needs them, but simply because they are available. A day laborer with availability late in the day means they've experienced a day with no wages, it means less or no food on their tables. Bringing them on he not only saves what is left of their day, but actually pays them as if they'd worked all day – he quite literally saves the day. But of course he does so by doing something that makes absolutely no business sense at all! Doesn't he know by paying excess workers when they didn't even have time to produce that he is driving up his cost? That makes no sense in the economy of this world, but in the economy of God's Kingdom there is one very important difference that we're just not used to in this world – the person is the thing of unmistakable value, not their production. In our world, if the math isn't there to pay a living wage in order to get inexpensive juice then we simply don't pay a living wage. In the world as God sees it, the value of the person is unchangeable. If the equation isn't working out for cheap juice at a living wage then the juice gets more expensive and if it becomes unviable then we collectively learn to live without.

The good news is that we have a choice about which of these two economies we wish to live in. We make that choice by choosing a starting point in our valuation of what is around us. The choice to live in the economy of this world is the default choice. If we do nothing we will naturally participate in the systems that assign ultimate value to *things* and thereby secondary value to those who provide them. If we are proactive though, we can live in a different economy. If we assign the people around us an infinite value right from the beginning and don't allow that value to change based on what *things* we want then we'll have an image of God's Kingdom to live into.

Amen.