

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 21, 2014

**The Minimum Wage**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
September 21, 2014

Matthew 20:1-16

My message today is, at least in part, a bit political and a social commentary. I tend to avoid that in my sermons but at times things like what I am saying need to be said from the pulpit. I hope that my remarks don't offend any of you.

Thursday's Charlotte Observer quoted Hugh McColl, the former CEO of Bank of America, as saying that the current financial crisis largely stemmed from greed.

Robert Reich has said that the moral crisis of our age is "...*insider trading, obscene CEO pay, wage theft from ordinary workers, Wall Street's gambling addiction, corporate payoffs to friendly politicians, and the billionaire takeover of our democracy.*"

Recently federal contractors in North Carolina have been exposed as systematically cheating on payment of employment taxes and hurting their employees by claiming that they are independent contractors instead of being employees.

Corporate greed is strangling our economy and causing millions of people to struggle to survive economically. Corporations are grossly overpaying their top executives, underpaying or otherwise cheating their employees, outsourcing their business operations overseas, and by inversion, the process of moving their corporate headquarters to another country with lower tax rates while continuing to operate as usual in the United States.

In commenting on today's scripture passage from Matthew, the devotional guide Our Daily Bread for April 5, 2014 said:

*"Jesus' parable of the workers and their grossly unfair paychecks confronts this scandal head on. Some people who have been idly standing around are hired by a landowner at the eleventh hour. The other workers, who have been serving him all day long, are shocked when each receives identical pay. What employer in his right mind would pay the same amount for one hour's work as for 12!"*

On the face of it, this parable seems strange, but is it really?

Let us consider the ongoing debate today about businesses which pay their

workers only the Federal minimum wage. The Federal minimum wage has been stuck at \$7.25 per hour since July 2009, over five years ago. In that interim prices of everything have been going up yet the minimum wage has not. A worker earning the minimum of \$7.25 has an annual income of only about \$15,000. For the average family that is far below the poverty level yet that is all that millions of people in this country are paid. Is that fair? Is that Christian? I think not.

I hasten to add that I am not referring to slackers but to the millions of Americans who struggle daily to support their families at the minimum wage level while their employers, in many cases, are overpaying their executives and making obscene profits yet claim that they can't afford to pay a living wage. Otherwise they claim that they would have to raise prices. Heaven forbid that they would have to take less of a profit or pay the CEO less.

What is forgotten in the minimum wage discussion is that the original idea of a minimum wage was to set a level at which working people could meet their basic needs.

The problem is that in a healthy economy prices will steadily increase. Hence stagnant wages lose purchasing power year by year and what once was a living wage quickly falls below the poverty line. Costs tend to double every seven to ten years in a normal economy. Hence wages need to do the same to keep up, but they aren't doing that --- not for minimum wage workers, not for school teachers, not for much of the middle class.

That said let us now consider the landowner who hired laborers for his vineyard. As is still the case in many parts of the world, workers gathered at a particular location each morning and would wait for employers to come and hopefully hire them. When they were hired they were paid what was the minimum daily wage of the times, one denarius. That was subsistence level income. They needed to earn a denarius each day to support their families, yet there were more people wanting to work than there were jobs. Not everyone got hired. Many did without.

In the parable, the landowner realizes that he needs more help in order to get the grape crop harvested. He goes back several times to hire more workers and then, at the end of the day, he pays all of them the same wage, one denarius, no matter if they worked the entire day or only an hour or two. It does seem unfair, doesn't it?

But, consider that families in the ancient world lived hand to mouth as do so many minimum wage workers today. That one denarius would feed them for a day and, if they didn't get work, they would go hungry.

It is notable that at least one major US minimum wage employer offers employees information on how to get food stamps and other public assistance. Instead of paying their employees what they should, they refer them to public assistance and to food banks. That company is the nation's largest retail chain of stores and is owned by the richest family in the country. To me, that is disgraceful. We won't pay you what we should but we will help you get public assistance. That isn't Christian. It is criminal.

In ancient times there were no food stamps, no public aid of any kind, so workers were paid what they needed to survive, one denarius a day in this case.

Once again, consider the landowner. He needed workers and as his need increased, he hired more and more of them. He knew that they each needed one denarius to be able to feed their families and that is what he paid all of them. It was the minimum wage of the time.

Looking at it that way, does what he did seem unfair?

What was Jesus really saying in this parable? Was he making social commentary on the minimum wage rate of the times or not?

The parables told by Christ always had a different meaning than the story itself, and this one is no exception.

The landowner asked *"Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"*

The parable makes no economic sense at all. That was Christ's intent in telling it because he was not talking about money. He was talking about grace, about salvation. You can't calculate grace as you would calculate a day's wages. As Our Daily Bread said, *"God dispenses gifts, not wages"* and grace is a gift.

The gift of grace is given to those who have lived their entire life as a Christian should. They receive the full day's wage. Others come to grace and salvation late in life, like the workers who were in the vineyard for only a few hours. Nevertheless, they receive the full measure of grace.

Another issue of Our Daily Bread told a story about an outspoken atheist named

Eddie who had spent his entire life denying the existence of God. At age 50, Eddie "... contracted a debilitating disease, and his health slowly deteriorated. As he lay in a hospice house awaiting death, Eddie was visited almost every day by some Christian friends he had known in high school. They told him again of Christ's love. But the closer Eddie came to dying, he was not interested in God."

"One Sunday, a pastor stopped by to visit. To everyone's surprise, Eddie prayed with him and asked Jesus for salvation. A few weeks later, he died"

"Eddie denied Christ for 50 years and spent just two weeks loving and trusting Him. But because of his faith, he will experience forever God's presence, glory, love, majesty and perfection. Some may argue that this isn't fair. But according to Jesus' parable in Matthew 20, it's not about fairness. It's about God's salvation and grace." (Our Daily Bread, "Introductory Edition").

William Barclay said, "*We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives us is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace.*"

Barclay also makes some comments which apply directly to those who oppose increasing the minimum wage, those who are getting rich at the expense of others. He said, "*Many a man in this world, who has earned great rewards, will have a very low place in the Kingdom because rewards were his sole thought.*"

All too many employers and politicians today fall into this category. Rewards are their first thought. **Greed!** They don't think like the landowner in our parable. Why don't they? Why don't they support paying honest workers, like fast food workers, like clerks at Wal-Mart, like our school teachers, what they should?

Will they be recipients of God's grace? I suspect that many will not.

Thankfully this church and the other churches throughout the country do care and are making great efforts to help those in need, many of whom are struggling because they do not earn a living wage --- five cents per meal, Lunch Bunch, projects like our yard sale, Presbytery programs, and on and on. We are attempting to fill the gap as best we can. We know what grace is and we follow Christ's second great commandment which is to love our neighbors as ourselves. **Amen.**

(Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible)