This Sunday, Matthew gives us what we have come to call the parable of the generous landowner and, to me, it is simultaneously inspiring and puzzling

Inspiring because here is an employer who kind of says – regardless of how long you work you deserve a decent wage and to have a chance at a good livelihood

Puzzling because here is an employer who kind of says – regardless of how long you work you deserve a decent wage and to have a chance at a good livelihood

Debie Thomas encapsulates both why this text is confusing to me and why it's so amazing at the same time in her commentary when she writes: "God — if indeed 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."[1]

Many theologians say in their commentaries that this parable turns our expectations upside down as that last line in the text highlights: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

But, honestly, for me, this parable more meets me at the intersection of what I dream the world can be like and the reality of living in the world we live in

[1] https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1500-a-troubling-generosity

The dream is that this world could be a world where God's values reign and everyone is taken care of the way the generous landowner cares for the laborers

The reality of our world is, well, not that – it's a much more competitive, winner takes all kind of place

Reading this gospel again this week reminded me of some illustrations I've seen before by Angus Maguire that depict the difference between equality and equity[2]

Have you seen these before?

It depicts three people who are trying to watch a baseball game – one person is tall, the second medium height, the third small like a child.

The three people are trying to look over the fence to watch the game, and in the image that illustrates equality each of the three spectators have been given a box to stand on

However, due to the height of the fence and the difference in their height, the tallest person almost gets an even better view, the medium height person can *just* see over the fence, and the shortest person still cannot see over the fence

While it's an equal allocation of the boxes, they're still not *all* able to watch the game

The next image depicts equity, in this image the tallest person doesn't get a box, the second person gets one box, and the third person gets two boxes.

[2] https://interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity/

In this illustration all three individuals can see the game over the fence. It's not an equal allocation of the boxes – one person got none, one got one, and one got two – but now all three individuals are able to observe the game

Have you seen these before? What's your reaction to these images?

The Interaction Institute for Social Change, the organization that published Maguire's images, partnered with the Center for Story-Based Strategy and Angus Maguire on what they call #the4thbox which adds two additional illustrations

"reality" and "liberation"

What do you notice about the "reality" illustration?

The reality illustration highlights the reality of how advantages are distributed in our country, where the tallest person – who represents the individuals in our society who have the most access to being able to see and play the "game" – has a lot of advantage over the other two observers

In this image, there aren't just 3 boxes that are trying to be shared, the tallest person has an absurd amount of boxes that they can stand on and the smallest person isn't even on the ground – they're in a hole!

It illustrates the severe advantage disparity that exists in our world – and we could name those advantages as wealth, health, being born in a certain place and not another, being born a certain gender and not another, being a certain race, being able-bodied, etc.

Some people just have way more advantages – way more boxes – than others

What do you notice about the "liberation" illustration?

The fence is gone!

None of the individuals need the boxes because the fence blocking access to the “game” is gone

I realize that these are imperfect images – they can’t capture all of the nuances of the reality of the world

But, I do think they’re helpful teaching tools – they help us to reflect

I see these images and I wonder which of them best resembles the Kingdom of God?

Which of these images are we to strive for as people of faith?

I may have told you before, but when I was serving Faith Lutheran Church in East Hartford, CT I was part of the early stages of some inter-faith community organizing

There was a nonprofit out of Hartford that had roots in the United Church in Christ that was seeking to do justice work in the greater Hartford area and they decided to do it through community organizing which, if you don’t know, is a slow and very intentional – and very effective – process for change

Slow because the foundational work of community organizing is building relationships – and building relationships across denominations is tricky enough nevermind across faith traditions that might be weary of each other

It’s only once relationships are built that you can start to think about the issues you might tackle together

Organizers differentiate community organizing and activism – community organizing emphasizes relationships and then issues; activism emphasizes issues and then relationships

But, back to these images by Angus Maguire – they remind me of something our mentor organizer in Hartford used to say

Our mentor organizer was this fantastic Irish, Roman Catholic guy named Pat Speer

Pat used to say that there are two metaphorical “feet” to churches and their outreach ministries

The first “foot” is charity – the immediate response to the immediate needs of a community.

This might be the equality or equity, even, images that Maguire drew: when people are hungry, feed them; when they’re naked, clothe them; etc. – make sure people have what they need to get by – make sure they have some boxes to stand on

This is such a biblical calling of our tradition and such an important service to our communities

And, there is a second foot – and the second foot is justice work

This is that “liberation” image that Maguire drew – it’s working to figure out what the barriers are to participation and wellbeing in the first place and seeking to tear them down

Pat would often say that churches were very good at that first “foot,” charity, but that they struggle to figure out how to get that second foot moving, “justice” (please excuse the ableism of the metaphor)

Many churches provide charity for the immediate needs of their neighbors and this is a good and holy calling, and St. Bart’s certainly embodies these ministries

But, we often don't know how to do the systemic- justice- related work of tearing down barriers and making systemic change in our communities without feeling like we blur the lines of bringing politics into the church

Advocacy – okay, we can see how we might get behind certain issues

Financial contributions – definitely, we can make that happen

Seeking systemic change to better the lives and livelihoods of our neighbors and to try to live more fully into the Kingdom of God? harder, sometimes to figure out how to do this

And, Pat Speer would say, that the best way to think about really making a difference with that justice "foot" of ours is community organizing – the slow, intentional work of building relationships across traditions, experiences, livelihoods that allows you to build enough power to change the big systems that advantage and enrich the few

I've never forgotten Pat and the interfaith leaders I met as part of that process in Hartford – and I have watched from afar as they have rid their city of slumlords, fought for the rights of immigrants, and sought fiscal policy reforms that are transforming the landscape of Hartford

And, much to my delight – St. Bart's has been invited into a community organizing effort here in Maine, too

The effort in Maine is Broad-based which means it's not just religious organizations – although religious organizations are proving to be the quickest to sign up – but organizing that is taking place across professions and not just a regionally-specific effort but a statewide effort

This organizing effort is still very much in the early stages, but there are nearly 15 organizations that have participated in regular trainings and meetings and are discerning further commitments like Khmer Maine, Angolan Community of Maine, Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, Ifka

Community Services, and many houses of worship across faith traditions including some of us from St. Bart's

To me, community organizing is so deeply aligned with our Christian values because it is relationship-centered rather than issue-centered – which, to me, isn't a bad thing necessarily, but cause-based activism can quickly divide us into "are you with this or against this?" and in today's society this conversation quickly becomes "political" and assumed to be aligned with one political ideology over another…and in our current climate, this is the tinder box of so much conflict these days

Relationship-based organizing might still ask us a question: "are you with your neighbor or against your neighbor?" and I think, as Christians, we've been given a pretty clear instruction from Jesus on that one

Certainly, there will be issues that those of us aligned with this movement might align with and try to seek change within our communities and within our state

We will come to a point in getting to know each other where we start to recognize the web of systems and policies that hold our neighbors and ourselves back from true health and vitality and we will, with them, seek to liberate us from those systems

But, community organizing starts from the premise that we are all inter-related human beings who – at our core – care about each other and we care about the flourishing of each other, and that's what we seek, regardless of political ideology and, in our case, because of our Christian mandate to love our neighbors

Jesus tells the parable of the generous landowner – the one who didn't care about how long you worked or how well you did but cared that you had a place in the vineyard and were taken care of

As faithful Christians, we align ourselves with broad based organizing to be the generous “landshares” in this narrative - letting go of our expectations of fairness and instead seeking justice and grace for all.

Amen.