I. GOD’S INVITATION TO A WAY OF JUST PEACE

A. GOD SPEAKS (20:1-2)

1. God speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven
2. God speaks, inviting all to serve in the vineyard
3. God speaks on expectations of reward

B. GOD EXAMPLES RACIAL EQUITY AND A JUST ECONOMY (20:3-7)

1. God repeatedly extends the invitation of welcome for all people to serve
2. God brings a new expectation for all rewards to be just

II. GOD’S MATHEMATICS FOR JUST PEACE

A. DISMANTLING OF RACIAL AND ECONOMIC PRIVILEGE (20:8-12)

1. God calls for the last to be first in receiving their just reward
2. People who feel privileged or superior expect to receive a greater reward

B. GOD’S APPEAL FOR JUST PEACE (20:13-14)

1. God examples all who serve are equal in their reward
2. God calls upon the privilege to trust in God’s generosity

III. TRUSTING IN GOD’S GRACE

A. GOD’S WILL AND PURPOSE FOR HUMANITY (20:15)

1. God challenges the economic understanding of the privilege
2. God speaks of grace and blessings given according to the divine plan

B. GOD’S GRAND REVERSAL (20:16)

1. God’s reversal calls forth racial equity
2. God’s reversal calls forth a just economy
3. God’s reversal calls forth the Kingdom of Heaven on earth
Narrative Context:

Jesus emphasizes that the kingdom of heaven operates differently from the ways of this world. As chapters 19 and 20 have to do with the equal value that God’s grace bestows upon all people. In 19:16-22, a rich young man came to Jesus asking, “Good teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” When Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give them to the poor, the man went away sorrowfully, because he had many possessions. Then, Peter, observing this exchange between the rich young man and Jesus, shares that the disciples have already given up everything to follow Jesus (19:27), and questions what their reward will be. Jesus answers by saying the disciples will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. But, Jesus also speaks to God’s invitation for all people to serve and be rewarded according to God’s grace, purpose and plan.

Conflicts at Play:

The conflicts at play arise as Jesus turns the expectations of the twelve disciples, upside down. In doing so, Jesus strips away the notion that there are those who are superior to others. Jesus strips away the notion that the privileged will be rewarded unjustly. Additionally, Jesus strips away the notion of scarcity, and invites racial equity and a just economy to be generously rewarded on earth as it is in heaven. As Jesus challenges the disciples to fully trust in an economy of God’s grace, he points to the way of justice and peace for all people.

Way of Just Peace:

In moral distress, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard workers to the disciples. As the story focuses on God’s generosity in welcoming everyone into the field, it portrays God as the landowner, the believers as workers, and the vineyard as the Kingdom of Heaven.

In this parable, Jesus uses a typical everyday scene to point out a spiritual truth about the value of God’s beloved community and tells the Good News about the economy of God’s grace. Jesus’s story explains that God is like a landowner who went out to find people to work in the vineyard. The first group expects to be paid to pay a denarius, which is a fair day’s wage. The second group expects to be paid what is fair. The last three groups have no expectations of their pay. The purpose of the parable is not for us to focus on the workers and what they do, but to focus on what the landowner does.

Thus, the first principle in the economy of God’s grace is for the workers to see the landowner as fair and just. The Good News about the Kingdom of Heaven is that God is the Sovereign Ruler who owns all things, and at the same time graciously bestows grace and blessings upon all of the beloved community.
The kind of justice and peace that God seeks is modeled in today’s lectionary by the Psalmist, who speaks on the economy of God’s grace in Psalm 105, verses 17-18. It states, “Joseph, was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters, his neck was put in a collar of iron: until what he had said came to pass.” In 105:20-21, it goes on to state, “The king sent and released him (Joseph): the ruler of the people’s set him free. He (the king) made him ruler of all his possessions.” Thus, the purpose of the parable is to teach us the economy of God’s grace by first helping us to see the just character of God.

Second, we see in the parable that rewards from the Kingdom of Heaven are not a matter of privilege or superiority. The first workers were upset with the landowner because they had worked longer and harder, and felt they deserved a superior reward than the others who came later. The first workers, who felt privileged, argue with the landowner to change the terms of their original agreement so that they could earn more than the others. But, the parable is not about the hierarchy of humanity, it is about the landowner’s grace for all who serve in the vineyard.

Third, we see the economy of God’s grace as having the sovereign right to distribute resources according to God’s purposes. In verse 15, we hear, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?” The landowner does not have the right to be dishonest or to cheat people, but does have the right to give generously to any and every one, which shows that we are equally loved by God. It is like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who instead of rejoicing in his father’s generosity towards his brother, challenges his father’s right to be generous and gracious. This parable is also designed to point out to us how easy it is to feel superior towards others, feel sorry for ourselves, or fail to appreciate God’s grace.

The fourth principle, which speaks of dismantling racial and economic privilege, is a key purpose in the economy of God’s grace, because the story teaches that Jews and Gentiles will have equal status within the kingdom of God. This way of justice and peace challenges the beloved community to seek Racial Equity and a Just Economy. As the Gentiles are the eleventh hour workers, who in the eyes of the Jews, come into the kingdom (the vineyard), in the last hour. They are like step children who do not deserve full standing in the household of God. They question how God could give Gentiles, who are uncircumcised, not part of the covenant, have no religious tradition, and do not keep God’s law, the same rewards or inheritance as the Jews.

And in response to these questions, there is an appeal to those who feel privileged to trust in God’s grace, which makes us all equal members of God’s covenant. In that, our standing and citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven is not a matter of when we received God’s grace, but that God’s grace is already upon us. The parable is not about the work of the first workers or the work of the last workers, it is about the grace and justice of God. “So, the last will be first and the first will be last,” which speaks to God’s grand reversal at the end of the parable.

In that, Jesus concludes the same way He started in verse 30 of chapter 19. Jesus had just told the parable of the rich young ruler, and said, “But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.” The parable in chapter 20 continues to illustrate this point, because the kingdom of Heaven is not partial to our perceived position on earth. Since the rich ruler, as well as the twelve disciples, were amazed that the rich ruler’s position did not qualify him to inherit the rewards of the kingdom, Jesus teaches us that in God’s economy things are often opposite of what we expect. Grace is not the way we normally do things, nor the way the economy of this world usually works. This is why we often do not
understand it.

As such, the workers charge the landowner with being unfair. But, why? According to the facts presented, it was not based on their love or concern for justice or fairness. Their argument was based on their own selfish privilege that the extra pay they wanted was pay they deserved. And, yet, the parable teaches us that in the Kingdom of Heaven there is no such thing as merit, for God’s grace is granted according to God’s gracious purpose.

God’s grace gives us a way of justice, peace and joy in our relationships with all people; with God; and even the Earth itself. And when we experience God’s grace, it can reveal in us the attitude that we are better than others and we deserve more than others. But, the economy of God’s grace teaches us not to put ourselves above other people because we all are equally loved as God’s beloved community. Instead, we are taught to humbly appreciate the kindness and generosity of God’s grace, which is freely given to all of humanity.

That is why all are welcome to answer, ‘Yes,’ to God’s invitation to serve in the vineyard, which calls upon us to serve together, by working towards creating systems of racial equity and a just economy. In that, this parable teaches us to trust in the economy of God’s grace, which calls for a grand reversal from the unjust ways of the world as we know it. As this grand reversal points towards the way of justice and peace, it invites everyone to work together, as the beloved community, to be the economy of God’s grace here on Earth, as it is in the Kingdom of Heaven.

May it be so. Amen.