

Someone Else's Win Isn't Your Loss

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 July 2026

Preacher: Heidi Mills

[0:00] My name is Heidi. I am associate pastor here at the table. and I don't think I have preached since the beginning of February.! So give me some grace.

I'm a little bit rusty. And if you would please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for allowing us to gather here in this place.

I am well aware that there is so much going on in our lives, in our city, in the world around us that is demanding our attention, making it feel like if we take our eyes off it for one second that things are going to collapse.

So I thank you for putting it on our hearts to come here today to have this moment of fixing our eyes on you and coming together as a community to share the good times and the bad times, to celebrate, to mourn, to grow together.

I pray that as I preach the word that you will just eliminate any excess anxiety, that you will allow the words that I have today be the words that would impact our lives and show us your grace and your truth.

[1:34] In Jesus' name, amen. Two Fridays ago, I stepped outside and I did something that I had not done in years.

I put on a KN95 mask because Canadian wildfire smoke had blanketed DC. It felt like a scene from Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower.

In this dystopian novel, we meet our main character, Lauren Olumina, who is living in a gated community. And resources were so scarce that survival meant keeping people out and meeting their own needs through any means necessary.

Water was more expensive than gasoline. And when her community was attacked, Lauren fled and she traveled across a barren California wilderness with fires blazing all around her.

The smoke in her lungs made it hard to walk, to see, to even breathe. But she continued. Lauren was living through an apocalypse.

[2:46] And often we think of an apocalypse as the end of the world. But it really means an unveiling, a revelation of things that had previously been hidden.

In the years after writing Parable of the Sower, Octavia E. Butler was often called a prophet. But she said that she was simply imagining what could easily come to pass if we continued on the same path.

Walking through wildfire smoke on my way to work, reminds me that we are living on a struggling planet. Scarcity surrounds us in the air we breathe, in the losses we encounter, in the dreams we defer.

We fear that may not be enough to go around. And when even healthy air seems scarce, it's hard to imagine anything beyond survival. Scarcity takes root in our very imaginations.

For the past several weeks, we've been in a sermon series called Dangerous Imagination, Afrofuturism, and the Parables of Jesus.

[3:59] And we've explored how authors like Octavia E. Butler wrote black folks, queer folks, and other marginalized people into the future as an act of resistance against imperialism, colonialism, and oppression.

Today, I'm going to introduce another voice into this conversation. Indigenous scholar Randle Woodley, who will help us move from this mentality of scarcity into our mentality of abundance. Indigenous communities are no strangers to apocalypse. Their own began centuries ago with genocide and continues today. But they found ways to survive and to thrive.

So I invite us to ask, in a time of apocalypse, how do we dare to imagine a future without scarcity and live into a future of abundance?

abundance? I will use a specific parable in Matthew as kind of a springboard to answer this question. So you can turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 20, verses 1 through 16.

[5:10] The words will also be on the screen if you would like. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

And after agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And when he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace.

And he said to them, you also go into the vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

And about five o'clock, he went out and found others standing around and he said to them, why are you standing here idle all day? They said to him, because no one hired us.

He said to them, you also go into the vineyard. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and going to the first.

[6:24] When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, these laborers worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day in the scorching heat.

But he replied to one of them, friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I chose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

This scene would have been instantly recognizable to Jesus' audience. In first century Palestine, day laborers would line up in the fields in the marketplace early in the morning to find work.

[7:37] If they did not find work, they would not be able to support their families. A modern example might be the migrant workers who line up to harvest the food we eat every day.

The day laborers in this time would have been viewed as expendable, excluded, from the wealth produced for the landowners. In this parable, the landowner hires workers and he agrees with them on what they should be paid, a denarius a day.

A denarius is roughly equal to a day's wage, nothing more, nothing less. He goes out several more times and he gets more vague with the workers every time.

First, he says he will pay them what is right and with the last group, he simply tells them to go out into the fields and at the end of the day, they all get the same.

Let me make this a little bit more modern for us. imagine that you have recently been laid off, you've been dogged, and you get a contracting job for a specific amount to work on a project and your hourly wage is not exceptionally high, it's not exceptionally low, it's just enough to kind of scrape by on and maybe it's a bit more than you thought you would get given the current state of our economy.

[9:06] But then, just as the project is nearing completion, someone else is hired right at that time and they get the same total amount that you did for doing all of that work.

It's kind of easy to understand the first worker's perspective. What do you mean I've been here this whole time doing all of this work and someone else can swoop in last minute and get paid the same?

It's giving a high school project where you do all the work and then the free letters get the same grade. So, when the first workers find out the later workers get paid the same, they complain.

They say, the last have worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day in the scorching heat. In their mind, the people who work the hardest should get the most.

They've been in the field since early in the morning. They probably got sunburned and muscle cramps for their efforts and meanwhile, they had to sit around and wait while others got paid before them.

[10:16] And this parable does not follow the rules that many of us have probably grown up with. You work hard and you get rewarded for that effort.

It goes against the Protestant work ethic which tries to convince us that hard work, discipline, and material success mean special treatment from God.

But the landowner pays everyone the same. Not because they did equal work, but because they were equally worthy of earning enough to support their families. He upends this logic of scarcity that says, more for thee equals less for me.

The first workers have bought into this logic and it makes them hard to see that the generosity of the landowner does not mean that they are walking away with anything less.

So this parable kind of primes us to judge the first workers, but as I'm kind of trying to inhabit their perspective, it made me wonder, what is so scarce in my own life that I feel resentment when it looks like others have it without earning it?

[11:31] For me, that answer is time. Time feels like the most finite resource I have.

It feels often that it's not my own, like I am careening from obligation to obligation without any space to breathe. I struggle not to check my email, even on weekends and evenings.

I get sidetracked by random messages and when I do get a moment to myself, I doom scroll to see what apocalyptic event needs my attention now.

And my own time feels so scarce that I sometimes get angry or upset when other people seem to have all the time in the world. And often, being this busy can feel like a matter of survival.

If I don't work, don't get paid. If I don't get paid, I can't support myself. I can't imagine that the first workers wanted to wake up early in the morning, sweat in the heat, wait to be hired, but they had no other choice.

[12:43] They had to work back-breaking hours for the equivalent of a day's wage. Our lives are not as different from theirs as we might think. So often, busyness is seen as a sign of merit.

If we run ourselves to the ground, then and only then do we earn enough to survive. And this constant feeling of time running out keeps us from daring to imagine, to dream of a world where we don't have to work until we drop, where our time is our own again.

If busyness is how we earn our survival, then someone else's rest can seem like they're getting something they haven't earned. But what if that is part of the lie of scarcity?

What if someone else, having rest, doesn't cost me mine? What if someone else's healing doesn't cost me mine? What if someone else's flourishing does not cost me my own?

This is where dangerous imagination begins. We can dare to imagine a future where someone else's gain does not mean our loss.

[13:59] The landowner asks the resentful first workers, are you envious because I am generous? Other translations ask, is your eye evil?

The landowner rejects this zero-sum game that tells us someone else finally having enough means that we have to make do with less. He decides that everyone deserves enough and his generosity to others does not mean depriving the first workers of anything.

This parable encourages us to change our eyesight, to look for abundance, to celebrate it, not just for ourselves, but for others.

But I want to take a bit of a turn here and ask, what if the landowner may not go far enough?

And what if, on some level, he too is still buying into this logic of scarcity? His generosity is good, essential.

[15:08] We can't cultivate the world that we want without giving freely about time, energy, and resources to ensure everyone can survive. But daring to imagine a world of abundance requires us to go beyond mere generosity.

If our imagination only goes as far as the landowner, we haven't gone far enough. During seminary, I encountered an interpretation of this parable that I had never heard before.

And honestly, when I was assigned this passage, I got a little bit nervous, because this interpretation is more critical of the landowner than maybe I would be.

But I couldn't get it out of my head. And so, I'm going to introduce it to y'all today. So, black theologian and professor, or Barry Hendricks, wrote a book called *The Politics of Jesus*, *Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings*.

And this book is one of my all-time favorite books that I read in seminary. It's up there with, like, *The Cross and the Linching Tree* by James Cone, *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman.

[16:24] I would highly recommend reading it. And he helped me understand something very important about parables. They often have more than one meaning depending on how you look at it.

And parables are not necessarily allegories where there's always a God character. They often have morally complex characters. They can be interpreted in multiple ways.

But they point to something true about the kingdom coming into being. So the traditional interpretation kind of goes as far as to say that kind of in a more spiritual way that it doesn't matter when you enter a relationship with God, whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, that grace is equal for everybody.

And on one level, like, that is a good interpretation. But Hendricks goes a level deeper, kind of grounds it more in the shortcomings of the landowner in a very tangible way.

He writes, some biblical commentators claim that his decision to pay all the workers the same is a positive egalitarian gesture.

[17 : 39] But one wonders how this could be so, given that he makes no similar equalizing gesture with his own wealth and status. The actions of the landowner keep his own privilege intact.

And he still reaps the benefits of everybody's labor. He owns these massive vineyards and he can basically hire, like, everybody in the marketplace to go work for him.

But at the end of the day, like, he still retains all of that wealth for himself. Or Barry Hendricks, in kind of, like, one of his most critical moments, he refers to the landowner as a plantation owner.

But where his critique is so sharp for me is where he points out that the generosity of the landowner doesn't resolve the injustice of the marketplace itself.

It doesn't change the system that forces people to wake up early in the morning to wait for work or they won't be able to support their families. It doesn't change the fact that the later workers were probably still out there braving the sweltering heat because others didn't want to hire them.

[18 : 55] Maybe because they were too disabled, too poor, too marginalized to be seen as fully worthy in a culture of scarcity. So generosity is a starting point.

But when scarcity is entrenched in our various systems, we are never short on the capacity to imagine something different. We can dare to imagine a world without the marketplace where no one has to stand idle waiting for enough.

The landowner decides to be generous one day, but it doesn't change the fact that the workers have to return day after day after day constantly on the edge of starvation.

We need to find ways to challenge the systems that create scarcity in the first place, not merely solve individual examples of scarcity. And to do this, we need ideas bold enough, audacious enough to help us live into the truth that abundance is possible even when everything around us tries to convince ourselves otherwise.

So we can learn how to do this from communities who have encountered scarcity and apocalypse before. In Randy Woodley's book, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, an indigenous vision, he develops a theology of shalom or the harmony way that is wide enough to care for all of creation.

[20 : 32] Randy Woodley defines shalom as how life is meant to be. Shalom is more than peace. It is about individual and collective well-being.

He says, Shalom is communal, holistic, and tangible. There is no private or partial shalom.

The whole community must have shalom or no one has shalom. Where there are homeless and jobless people amidst the employed and wealthy, shalom cannot exist.

Shalom is not for the many while the few suffer, nor is it for a few while many suffer. It must be available for everyone.

In this way, shalom is everyone's concern. So the generosity of the landowner meets the needs of people within this broken system.

[21 : 37] But shalom calls us to change the systems that keep people from flourishing and living abundantly. But what does this pursuit look like?

It's very easy to be kind of pie in the sky about this to say like, oh yeah, we can like burn it all down, create a new society from the ground up.

If only it were that simple. But Randy Woodley invites us into this practice of shalom no matter where we are.

He tells us, shalom is not a utopian destination. It is a constant journey. One does not wait on shalom. One actually sets about the task of shalom.

In other words, people need to be going about the business of making shalom and living out shalom. So we can begin kind of in a similar place to the landowner, honestly, by refusing to play the zero-sum game of scarcity.

[22:48] There is more than enough to go around, and both you and your neighbor can have what you need to thrive and not just survive. So to move this from head knowledge to more heart knowledge, I invite you to start small.

Begin an abundance log. Every day, write down three things that you received without earning or producing it.

This will help you kind of separate yourself from this idea that your worth is dependent on your productivity. God And so earlier in my sermon, I mentioned that there is not enough time for me to do everything I want to do.

This week, as I was preparing the sermon, God was constantly having me run up against this idea that I don't have enough time, and I was like, this is exactly the logic of scarcity that I'm trying to preach about.

It's funny how God does that. And I had to constantly remind myself there was more than enough time. And more than that, there was more than enough time to do what genuinely feeds my soul that doesn't require me to perform a task, but to just be who I am.

[24:12] For example, at work, I celebrated two of our Yulong volunteers at my day job, because they were unfortunately reaching the end of their service year.

I had a great lunch with them where we just kind of chatted about soccer, about our next steps. I made time for walks with close friends and empanada runs.

My emails were still there. My to-do list was still longer than any one person could handle, but I chose to focus on the abundant connection around me.

I have still not arrived. I still struggle with thinking that sending that one email will solve all of my problems. I still guilt trip myself for letting a task go unfinished.

But I am learning to open my eyes and let life surprise me with those unexpected moments of abundance. And this is the beginning.

[25:15] We can multiply these everyday examples of abundance into a world where everyone can thrive. So let me return to the example of the parable of the sower.

I don't want to spoil it too much. I have to spoil it a little bit. I should still read it. But basically Lauren traveled through the smoke, the wildfire, and she emerged on the other side to create a new community that she called ACORN.

And this community is made out of people who had previously been written out of the future. The formerly enslaved, those fleeing violence and addiction, infants and young children and women, all of the people who ended up being bound together not by blood but by choice.

They lived sustainably on the land. They built water wells. They shared food. They cared for each other freely. In a time of apocalypse, they found and cultivated abundance.

And this is what Afrofuturism teaches us. How to live into Jesus' own words that the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

[26:36] Daring to imagine isn't about pretending the smoke isn't there or it's going to go away. It's about imagining beyond what the smoke is trying to convince us is true.

We can dare to imagine a world where people who have been erased are given a place of honor and people with no future are given a future. So this week, take a good look at the everyday examples of abundance around you.

What makes you feel worthy beyond just what you can do? what moments of abundance do you notice in the lives of others? Write them down. Share it with someone. And as you begin to notice abundance around you, you may also begin to notice where abundance is being withheld.

And you can allow those moments of clarity to lead you into daring to imagine a different future and work with others to build shalom from the ground up.

The smoke will always be there. But thankfully, so will our imaginations. Thank you.