

“Life’s Not Fair—Thank God!”

Sermon – September 20, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

In southern Africa **[slide]** is the Kalahari Desert, is a large semiarid sandy savanna covering 350,000 square miles, including much of Botswana, as well as parts of Namibia and South Africa. This is where the !Kung San people live. **[slide]**. These are the people **[slide]** that using clicking sounds in their speech that we used to call “Bushmen” and were featured in the 1980 film, “The Gods Must Be Crazy.”

The !Kung **[slide]** are one of the oldest continuous populations of human beings on Earth **[slide]** going back somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago!

Up until about 22,000 years ago, **[slide]** they were the largest, most dominant population on earth.

And having some geographical barriers that kept them relatively isolated, they had the same lifestyle for the last 11,000 years—about the same time that agriculture first developed in the Fertile Crescent in the late Stone Age followed 5,000 (!) years later by the first civilization.

During that time **[slide]** are they live in relatively small groups of 20 to 30 people typically living in huts in a circular arrangement.

With that circular or semi-circular layout **[slide]** the huts faced a shared, central plaza to optimize communal visibility and daily sharing.

[slide] The huts faced inward toward each other, reflecting intense familial social cohesion and a lack of privacy

Then in the 1960s—in many of our lifetimes—major changes started to take place. **[slide]** The government enforced resettlement, sedentarization, and a shift from hunter-gatherer toward an agro-pastoral economy.

This radically changed the village layout **[slide]** from the circular arrangement to linear or grid-like.

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[slide] Huts aligned parallel to access roads, neighboring cattle posts, or government water boreholes. Infrastructure became fixed.

[slide] Huts now faced outward or toward the road, introducing physical barriers and promoting a desire for private household autonomy

[slide] After 11,000 years, in just 30 years the !Kung went from highly egalitarian, close-knit communities to modern structure and economy, which included greater material accumulation, a shift from gifting to hoarding of goods, and a fragmentation of society to be more isolated and uneven.

[slide] Besides being a sociological history lesson, this relates to our gospel lesson today and, frankly, to our society today.

Today’s gospel passage is Matthew 20:1-16 and follows from the previous chapter where Jesus tells his disciples, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Peter says to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” And Jesus replies that they will sit on thrones with him and that everyone who has left their old life behind for him will inherit eternal life. He ends the chapter saying, “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

Today’s passage immediately follows that with, “For the kingdom of heaven is like...”

Notice in the gospels Jesus never really gives a detailed description of the kingdom of heaven like a reporter would. This is because heaven is both indescribable to us mere mortals and because it is not so much a destination but a way of life, even if it’s the afterlife.

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Thus, Jesus gives us another of us another parable to try to convey some aspect of heaven. No single parable—not even all the parables—can fully capture the kingdom of heaven for us, but we can learn something about it if we listen carefully

Today’s parable is a familiar yet vexing one—and unique to Matthew. A landowner—or more literally a household master—goes out to hire laborers to work in the vineyard. He hires some around 6 a.m., more at 9 a.m., then noon, 3 p.m., and finally 5 p.m.

He tells the first ones he’ll pay them a denarius, which was a silver coin, and a typical amount for day’s work. It could feed a family for maybe three to four days—subsistence level living.

He tells the second group he will pay them, quote, “whatever is right.”

Nothing is said about the other groups.

At the end of the day, he pays *everyone* a denarius and from the perspective of those who worked all day, he adds insult to injury by paying the laborers in reverse order of the number of hours they worked.

I have yet to run across anyone who has heard this parable and says, “Yeah, that all sounds fair.” So, let’s unpack this a bit.

Note that in Jesus’ time all these workers would be living at subsistence levels and from the text none of them had any work at the beginning of the day and only some get picked initially. This is a real situation with migrant workers today who gather in the morning and see how many of them will be picked to work that day.

So, the ones first selected are the lucky ones; they will have work. The others may or may not. And the owner promises those workers a denarius, which they do receive.

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Yet at the end of the day, they aren’t thinking about that—they are looking at others and what they are getting. They are thinking only in terms of a reward that is “fair and just”. That is, the pay must be commensurate with the hours worked—as if the work itself was not the real "reward."

Remember, they could have had no work.

In a very real sense this parable is about coveting. That is, having an intense, wrongful desire for something that belongs to someone else. You’ll recall the 10th commandment is about not coveting anything of your neighbor’s.

While “covet” may not seem the most obvious word to describe what is going on here, it does fit both the emphasis of Jesus’ teaching and the overarching emphasis in Matthew on the Law. Coveting lies at the heart of this parable. I’m certainly not immune to it.

When I first moved here in August 1980 to work for GE as a systems engineer, I had a pret-ty good salary for someone coming straight out of college: \$21,600* a year, just bit more than the median family income at that time—and I was single! I was so pleased, that one day I was in line at the cafeteria with a new friend and coworker, Bill. And I asked, “What did they give you?” Bill was reluctant and didn’t want to do it, but I persisted. Finally, he said, “\$22,100”. I was crushed. We both were hired at the same time for the same kind of work with the same experience and yet he was getting more. A whole 2.3% more.

Similarly, those first workers in the vineyard were satisfied with their wage—until they found others who essentially got more, from an hourly wage standpoint. And yet, this parable is not about running a vineyard or fair wages literally to a worker.

We know the disciples have given up everything—but they are also looking for reward. And this parable is for them. Later on, in this same chapter, the

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mother of James and John will ask Jesus for them to sit at his right hand in the kingdom!

The disciples, like us, are human and covet what others have or what they can have instead of others—like the parable in Luke where the older brother is incensed when his father celebrates the return of the younger prodigal son.

Jesus is trying to point out in this parable that it doesn’t matter who or when someone is “saved.” God’s mercy is boundless. We should not be envious of God’s generosity, but rejoice in it. Because regardless of where we think we compare to other people on a relative scale, on an absolute scale we are all so far short that you can’t even tell the difference on a graph.

Faced with God's boundless love for the world, especially when it is lavished upon others, we reveal whether we view our own labor as a gift from God or as benefit to God, as the joyful fulfillment of our created purpose or as the mere endurance of scorching heat.

The !Kung, like the rest of modern society, lost their tight-knit egalitarianism when they were able to hoard things individually and see what others had and compared themselves to it. In other words, to covet. It took them only a few decades after 11 millennia to lose it, showing that humans are fundamentally frail creatures.

As the laborers in the parable should have focused on the generosity of the household manager, so we should focus on the covenantal faithfulness of God. That though we have all fallen short, God rewards us anyway. Life’s not fair—thank God!

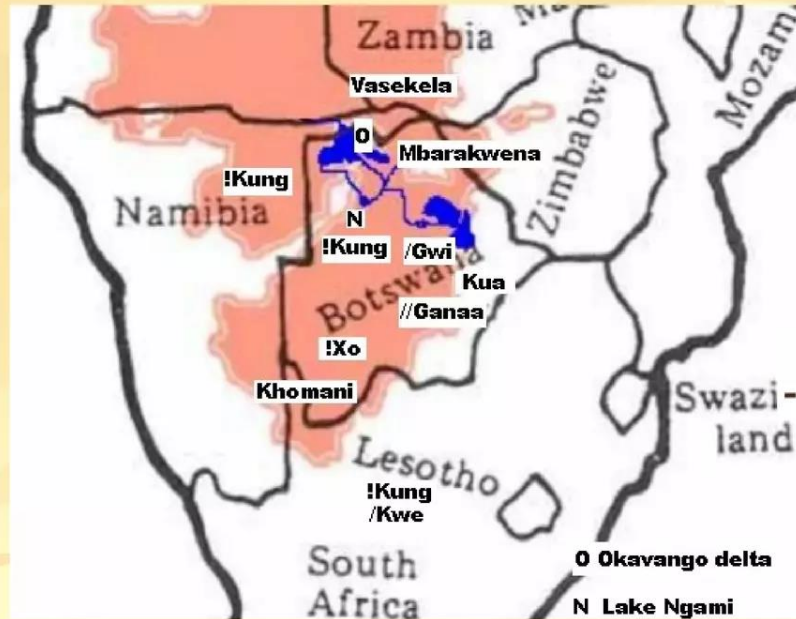
In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.

*In retrospect, I think it was \$20, 600.

Sermon



Location of the !Kung San



- Shaded area: major !Kung and related peoples.
- Most of the !Kung live in Namibia and Botswana

!Kung People

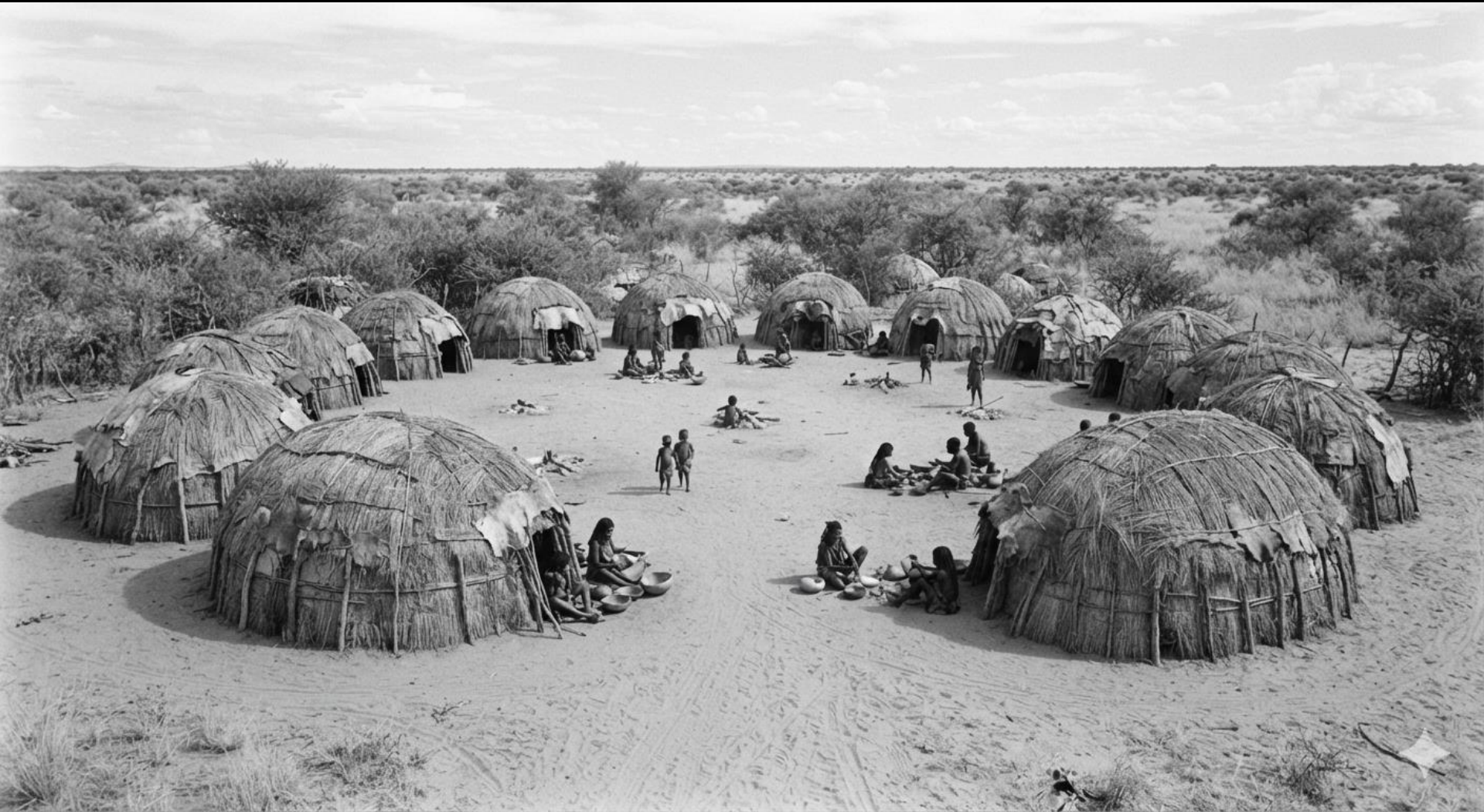


!Kung People

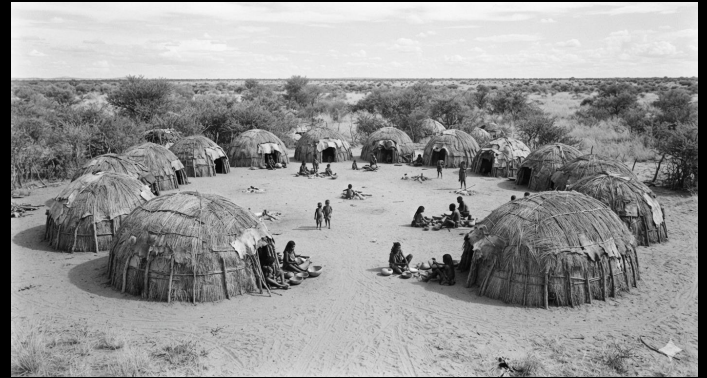


- **One of the oldest continuous populations of human beings on Earth: 100,000 to 200,000 years ago**
- **Largest, most dominant population on earth until 22,000 years ago**
- **Same lifestyle for 11,000 years**

Village Layout for 11,000 Years



Village Layout for 11,000 Years



- **Circular or semi-circular cluster.**
Huts faced a shared, central plaza to optimize communal visibility and daily sharing
- **Huts faced inward toward each other,**
reflecting intense familial social cohesion and a lack of privacy

Village Layout Radical Change in 1970s and 1980s

- Government-enforced resettlement, sedentarization, and a shift toward an agro-pastoral economy



Village Layout Radical Change in 1970s and 1980s



- **Linear or grid-like. Huts aligned parallel to access roads, neighboring cattle posts, or government water boreholes.**
- **Huts faced outward or toward the road, introducing physical barriers and promoting a desire for private household autonomy**

!Kung People



- **In 30 years went highly egalitarian, close-knit communities to modern structure:**
 - **Material accumulation**
 - **Shift from gifting to hoarding**
 - **Fragmentation of the public sphere**

Sermon

