

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 20:1-16

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"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,^[a] he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.^[b] ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.^[c] ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?^[d] ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'^[e] ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

This is the word of the Lord.

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Psalm 103:1-5, 11-12.

Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, *bless* His holy name! ²Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: ³Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, ⁴Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, ⁵Who satisfies your mouth with good *things*, *So that* your youth is renewed like the eagle's...For as the heavens are high above the earth, *So great* is His mercy toward those who fear Him; ¹²As far as the east is from the west, *So far* has He removed our transgressions from us.

This is the word of the Lord.

“ENVY OR GRATITUDE”

Well, this parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, another of the “The Kingdom is like” lessons which Jesus told, goes down a bit like cough syrup, right? It’s something that we know is right and probably good for us, since Jesus said it, but oh, how awful it tastes. Robitussin comes to mind or Tussinex. The landowner, who represents God’s character, had gone at dawn to the town square where laborers gathered every day (not unlike the system still in use where migrant workers follow the harvest). He hired a group at sunrise and then he returned 4 more times to hire more. The final group he hired when the day’s work was nearly done. When it came to paying them, the owner began with those hired last and they received a full day’s pay. But so did, however, those who’d worked from dawn, in the blazing heat. This was what was promised. The first workers complained that it was unfair, to which the owner called them out, saying, “*Are you envious because I am generous?*” This is not a labor union’s model story for sure¹. It goes down hard.

It tastes a bit better when we understand the context, what was going on before and after Jesus told the parable. Just PRIOR, Peter had said to Jesus what all the disciples were likely thinking....something like...“Surely, you don’t think as much of these dishonest tax collectors, these prostitutes, these unclean sinners that you’ve been hanging out with, as you think of us, do you? Surely you don’t love them as much as you love us. They’re not worth as much to you as we who’ve left our jobs and families, who’ve sacrificed so much to follow you, are they?”² And by the way, what can we expect in the way of reward for our loyalty?” (*pause*) Well, Jesus responded to Peter by promising the disciples 12 thrones in the world to come. But he was clear that the first will be last, and the last will be first.

And just AFTER the Laborers in the Vineyard parable, James’ and John’s mother asked Jesus to give her two sons the best thrones in the kingdom, one on Jesus’ left and one on his right. Jesus told her in essence that “his throne was not going to be out of gold and jewels, but out of wood and nails in the shape of a cross.”³

¹ Tom Wright. *Matthew for Everyone. Pt 2* (Louisville: WJKP; 2002), 56.

² John Buchanan. Sermon: “*Too Much Grace?*” <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/1999/111499.html>. (accessed 9-21-17).

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. “Beginning at the End: Matt 20:1-16” In: *The Seeds of Heaven* (Louisville: WJKP; 2004), 99-106.

From the context, we can see that the audience for Jesus' parable was suffering from the second child syndrome. You know...that "Wait, how come there's no photos of me anywhere and six albums of my older brother" syndrome...that..."hey, how come my older sister's pacifier got sterilized when it fell, and mine just got brushed off on mom's sleeve?" syndrome. They were feeling insecure, not looking at what they had but what they didn't. And they were envious of others, seeing only inequity in Jesus' lesson.

And if we're honest, we get that. We know inequity. We can spot unfairness a mile off. We've been on the short end of the stick before. We've been the last kid chosen for the pick-up ball game, even though it was our idea and we're the one supplying the ball. We've been that new employee who stays late, skips lunches, goes up and beyond in our work, does special errands for the boss, yet gets the same raise as our co-workers who surely don't miss their coffee breaks. We've been the student overlooked for the scholarship because of our age, gender or race or maybe we just don't have "pull".

Yes, we know unfair, "which," as one commentator has pointed out, "is all the more reason why we think it important that God should be fair". "God should be the One who keeps track of how long and hard we've worked. We should be able to count on God to reward us accordingly. God should be the One who makes sure that the people who are first stay first and those who are last stay last,"⁴ God should keep others from cutting in line. But it is not so. At least it seems that way from Jesus' parable. *pause*)

Well, it does seem that way if we're thinking that the landowner's (God's) purpose, was to make a wise business deal. But what if instead the divine purpose was to provide a "life giving affirmation of all people's worth."⁵ Look again at what the landowner said to the ones he hired last, who were still in the village square? "*Why are you standing here?*" To which they responded, "*Because no one has hired us.*" (i.e. "*Nobody wants us. Nobody needs us.*"). They were not idle by choice, but by circumstance. And then the owner said, "*You go also into the vineyard.*" (i.e. "*I need you!*" "*I have work for you.*" "*You are valuable to me.*")

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor

⁵ John Buchanan.

This perspective on the parable makes it all go down a whole lot easier, doesn't it? In fact, it's pretty humbling to see the amazing grace of God who is not concerned about profit margin or the rewarding of extra credit, who doesn't watch over a cosmic score card, but cares about everybody the same. God especially looks after the marginalized, the left-over, the ones the world forgets and gives them a sense of worth. God pursues and includes all people and although it may be that God is not fair, by our standards, God is however generous, beyond our wildest imaginings. (*LONG PAUSE*)

Now, you might be wondering what motivation there is then for being good. If we all, everyone, get equal pay, why bother working hard all day? Why should we put effort into being good and kind and faithful? Well, please know that the grace of God is not cheap. It's **COSTLY!** It cost the life of God's only begotten Son. For us, he lived and died. (*"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* Rom 5:8) This in itself, when it is fully comprehended, compels our devoted response. Forgiven, free, loved, included, valued...we can really do nothing else but be grateful and **LIVE FOR GOD!**

William Muehl, from Yale Divinity School, once preached a sermon in which he spoke of our response to grace. He said that *God's forgiving grace is not about allowing us to accept the past, but giving us a future, a different one, one in which we serve to help bring the Kingdom.* He pointed out that just like the prodigal son was expected to get up the morning after his welcome home party and go to work in the field...just like the forgiven teenager is not allowed to lay on the couch afterward, but is expected to get busy doing homework and household chores.... so the laborers who were hired at the end of the day were expected to go into the vineyard the next morning at sunrise. **AND** the son, the teenager and the laborers were eager, compelled to do so because they now knew that they were of enormous value to God...to **GOD!**⁶

Yes, this "the Kingdom is like" parable goes down much easier when we consider that God's gracious purpose was/is to include all and affirm everyone's purpose and equal worth. And

⁶William Muehl. Sermon: *"To Hell with Acceptance"* Quoted in: Ron Shive, *"Let's welcome forgiveness as our nation heals"*. <http://www.kinston.com/article/20150626/news/150629237> (accessed 9/22/17).

what's more....the lesson tastes absolutely amazing if our perspective also includes a recognition of where WE are in line. We are not, as we likely first imagined, at the front of the line. **WE ARE AT THE BACK!** Not only are we ones who experience the unfairness of life, (i.e. we are sometimes the marginalized, outsiders, the ones the world forgets), but we are at the back also because WE deserve to be there. We are not good as we want to be. We miss the mark often and it grieves the Lord. Barbara Brown Taylor says it well, "*On any given day of our lives, when the sun goes down and a cool breeze stirs the dusk, when the work is done and the manager heads toward the end of the line to hand out the pay, there is a very good chance that the cheers and back slapping, the laughter and gratitude with which he is greeted will turn out to be our own.*"⁷ (LONG PAUSE)

But friends, the good news is this: no matter what, God's promise is that we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will actually make it through the doors! And this is not because of who we are but because of who God is."⁸

So, we dare not begrudge that generosity of God, or be envious of others to whom God chooses to give mercy, grace, forgiveness and salvation. God's ways are God's ways. We need not spend time sizing up whether or not others are deserving, worthy and appropriately appreciative.⁹ **IF WE DO, THEN WE HAVE FORGOTTEN WHO WE ARE AND WHERE IN LINE WE STAND.** We need, instead, to take note and bask in the love which our Lord pours upon us each day. Maybe we need to make lists....I have a friend who posts on Facebook one thing a day for which she's grateful. Earlier this week, it was "for cooked oatmeal". Yes, we need to note and be grateful for our blessings, and then, then, friends, we need to **LIVE FOR GOD**, for the bringing of the Kingdom, for being his light, life and love for the world. (LONG PAUSE)

"The Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." Amen.

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor.

⁹ Jill Duffield. "Are you envious because I am generous?" Presbyterian Outlook, September 24, 2017.