

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 20:1-16 (NRSV)

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

SERMON SERIES

Some day I'm going to do a series of sermons entitled, "Things Jesus Said That Will Still Make You Angry." And I would have plenty to say. The actions of Jesus are often quite shocking. His teachings often seem to fly in the face of what common sense would seem to tell us.

For example, do you remember the story of Martha and Mary? Jesus comes to visit with an entourage. Mary stays in the living room listening to Jesus, and poor Martha is left to make preparations for her guests alone. Finally in desperation Martha comes to Jesus says, "Don't you care that I'm doing this all by myself?"

And Jesus tells Martha, "It's better to come listen to me than it is worry so much about what is cooking in the kitchen." My wife tells me, "You know I've always had issues that story! It's not fair. Martha was doing all the work, and Jesus told her she ought to chill and listen to him. Who was going to feed this gang that showed up on her doorstep?"

Actually, I don't get as mad at that story as I do at the story of the Prodigal Son. You see, I'm the oldest brother in our family, and I really find this story hard to stomach. Do you remember that story? In that story, it is the older brother who does the right thing. He stays home and works hard. But, that's not how Jesus tells it.

In Jesus' parable, once again it is the hard worker who comes off looking like the bad guy. The wild eyed younger brother decides to take part of the family inheritance and waste it on several months of wine, women and song.

It was bad enough that dear old dad was stupid enough to allow something like this to happen. But, do you know what he did when the kid came crawling home? He threw a party!

The elder brother is incensed. He has worked on the farm while his younger brother has been away having the time of his life, and he has to learn from the servants that the old man is throwing a party for this juvenile delinquent. I don't blame him for not wanting to join the party. I wouldn't have joined the party either. It just wasn't fair.

EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK?

Today's lesson is in that same tradition of things that Jesus said that seem unfair. I come from a union family, and I learned early on that workers should receive equal pay for equal work. If the going rate is \$5 an hour, a person who works one hour should get \$5, and a person who works four hours should get \$20. It's simple math.

But, that's not what happens in Jesus' story. Nothing is ever simple and predictable in Jesus' world.

The parable begins with a landowner rising early in the morning to hire some day laborers for his vineyard. The landowner agrees to pay these early birds a denarius for a day's work in the vineyard. It's a fair wage, and they're glad to have the work.

For whatever reason, the landowner keeps hiring people. Maybe he has a bumper crop this year. But, he goes back to get more help at 9 AM, 12PM, 3PM, and 5PM. The landowner doesn't tell these that he hires late what he will pay. He just promises to give them "what is fair."

Now, as we know, the workday is almost over at 5PM, what the Bible calls the "eleventh hour." So, I suspect these eleventh hour workers didn't expect much. They no doubt thought that they would be paid last and they would be paid the least. It was only fair. But, when it came to time to pay the workers, the eleventh hour workers were paid first, and they received a full day's wage!

Now the early birds were watching all this, and they were already starting to celebrate. If he gave those guys who only worked an hour a denarius, then we should get twelve denarii. We can take a few weeks off!

But, it didn't work out as they had hoped. The pay wasn't proportional. The earliest workers who bore the heat of the day got the say pay as the workers who only worked an hour, one denarius.

To put it mildly, they were not happy.

I don't blame them. I've worked for capricious employers who have overpaid lazy Johnny come lately workers more generously than the

faithful hard working employees who had been at the firm longer. It made me mad when it happened to me. It was terribly unfair.

I believe that Peter Drucker had it right in his famous line about how things work in the business world. In describing what he called the "Peter Principle" he wrote that "people rise to the level of their highest incompetence."

I have worked for some people who have risen to that high level. They do less work and yet receive the same money. It's not fair! And yet Jesus tells a story that seems to glorify that principle.

What about the value of hard work Jesus? Don't you know how hard we work for you? Don't you know that we are the righteous ones who come to church each week and pay our tithes? Isn't our faithfulness worth something?

HARD WORK AND BLESSINGS

You see, we have this unspoken belief that at least God will be fair with us. Our employer may not be fair, our spouse may not be fair, our friends and family may not be fair, but at least God will be fair. We think that if no one else notices when we cook the meals, clean the house and do extra work on the job, at least God will notice.

We even used to have an old hymn that expressed that wish. In the hymn we asked the question, "Will there be any stars in my crown?" In other words, we have a reason to work harder. Those of us who are more faithful can look forward to a greater reward in heaven. All our hard work will "pay off" in the end. There will be stars in our crown. At least that's what we want to believe.

I'm told that there's an inscription on some Roman shrines that suggests that this is indeed the purpose of religion. The inscription reminds worshippers why they come to the temple to make their offering. It encouraged them to say as they made their offering, "I give in order that you may give."

In other words, they were making a bargain with their god. Working for their god was a good deal because they expected to get back more than they had given. Religion was simply a good investment.

There are many examples of that same kind of thinking in the Old Testament. Remember Jacob, that great schemer who left home because he cheated his brother out of his birthright? He had to leave home because of his chicanery, but on the way to a new land he had a dream, a dream about the glory of heaven in which the Almighty promised to bless him.

And how did Jacob respond to that promise of blessing? He said, "Great, God. I'll work for you. You bless me, and I will cut you in on the action. I'll give you back 10% of what you give me." Such a deal!

The world is full of Jacob-like people who expect God to bless them according to their hard work and righteous behavior. Like Jacob they have tried to make a deal with God. They have promised to work hard, and they expect God to bless all that they do.

THE SOVEREIGN WILL OF GOD

Many people think this is the essence of faith. Many people firmly believe that the harder you work the more blessings you receive. But, according to Jesus, this is not the story.

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God just doesn't work that way. According to Jesus, the Kingdom of God doesn't work on the merit system but on the sovereign will of Almighty God. God chooses people and rewards them according to His own pay scale.

God is represented by the landowner in this passage and the key verses are verses 14 and 15, in which the landowner tells the disgruntled employees,

Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. [15] Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? Matthew 20:14-15 (NRSV)

We don't hear much about the sovereignty of God any more. We hear many sermons about how we should do this and do that. But, the Gospel is not about what we have done or what we should do. The Gospel is not about the work we must accomplish in the vineyard of life.

The Gospel is about what God has done for us. It is about a gift that He has given us, a gift that is all out of proportion to the work that we have done or could ever hope to do. The Gospel is about an undeserved gift.

It's true that most people identify with the workers who came early in the day and worked hard. And so, when we hear Jesus' parable, we are not happy. It doesn't fit with what we believe about ourselves and our idea of fair play.

And that's exactly what Jesus wanted this parable to accomplish. Sometimes our assumptions are so ingrained and so faulty that we need to have those sacred myths forcefully and unexpectedly challenged.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that this parable is like the cod liver oil that mothers used to give their children for what ailed them. It didn't taste good. It didn't go down well. But, those mothers insisted that in the end it would help.

I think Jesus' story is like spiritual cod liver oil. It doesn't taste good. It doesn't go down well. But, in the end it will be good for us. It will teach us what the kingdom of God is all about. It will give us, as Jesus so often put it, "ears to hear."

ELEVENTH HOUR WORKERS

How we hear any story depends upon whom we identify with in the story. As I said, most of us think of ourselves as those who have worked hard all day and "deserve" more than the others.

We are like Charlie Brown's little sister Sally as she made her out her Christmas list in that classic Charlie Brown Christmas special. Sally is writing a letter to Santa, and she has a huge list of toys. After all she has been a "very good girl." At the conclusion of her letter she writes, "But, if this is too much to carry, just send cash."

This is too much for Charlie Brown. He can't believe that his own sister could be so greedy and says as much.

Sally responds in a huff, "All I want is my fair share. All I want is what I have coming to me."

Sally thinks that she has been working hard at being a good girl all year and that she deserves a great Christmas. She just wants what she has coming to her.

Many of us have that same attitude. Indeed, you might even say that this sense of entitlement is essence of the American way of life.

The Rev. Jin S. Kim preached a sermon at General Assembly in which he said, "I was seven years old when my family immigrated to the United States, but I remember the exact moment I knew I had become a true American. It wasn't the day I received my citizenship; it was the day I thought to myself: We gotta do something about all these foreigners coming into this country! I think I was about twelve years old then."

It is amusing to think that a recent immigrant could think disparagingly about all those "foreigners" coming to our country, but it's true.

Many of us think of ourselves as long time residents who deserve more than those who are just now entering our country.

And, in the same way, many of us think that because we have been a part of the church for a long time, we are worth more to God. We identify with those who worked hard all day. We have a sense of entitlement.

But, how would we interpret this parable if we entered it at another point? How would this story look to us if, instead of identifying with the workers who had been in the field all day, we identified with the eleventh hour workers?

Suppose we were the ones who had no job and no prospects? And suppose the owner of the vineyard invited us to work at the last moment promising only to give us what was fair? And then, at the end of the day, we find ourselves receiving much more than we deserve?

The story seems a lot better now doesn't it? That's the real story. That's the good news of the gospel.

God doesn't reward us according to our works. God rewards us according to his marvelous grace. All of us are eleventh hour workers. We don't deserve the full wage. But, we get it.

God gives us more than we deserve because it's God's world and God has the right to be generous and compassionate to all his workers, whether they come sooner or later. And the only thing that can keep us from receiving this grace is our own self-imposed limitations.

SMALL FISH AND A SMALL GOD

Someone once visited a fishing pier and watched a fisherman pull in a large fish, measure it, and throw it back in the water. He caught another fish, a smaller one this time. He measured it, and put it in his bucket to keep.

Intrigued, the onlooker continued to watch and noticed that the fisherman continued to throw the big fish back into the water while keeping only the smaller fish that were less than ten inches. Finally, the onlooker just went up to the fisherman and said,

"Look, I've noticed that you're throwing all the large fish into the water and keeping the fish that are ten inches long or shorter. I've never seen anything like this before. Can you please tell me why you're doing this?"

And the fisherman replied,

"Oh, the answer is simple. My frying pan is only ten inches across."

We are often like that fisherman. We impose our strange limitations on the blessings of God. We think that God must respond to the conditions that we have set up and measured. We have our ways, and we think that God must fit into our ways.

And so our God is too small, and the blessings we receive are limited.

We grab for the tiny little blessings and let the bigger blessings get away. We concentrate on the daily dollar and forget that there is much more to life than just making a living. We are so blinded by a sense of entitlement that we cannot receive the blessings that come to us in wild and unexpected ways.

God is greater than our ten inch frying pans. God's ways are not our ways, thank God for that. God gives us more than good advice and payment for services rendered. God gives us a treasure that we could never earn in a million years. God gives us what we really need, things like forgiveness, salvation, and life eternal.

A NEW CULTURE

Our relationship with God is not a matter of what we do and how we figure what is fair. Our relationship with God is a matter of what God does and how God figures what is fair. And in God's Kingdom there is a whole new way of doing math. The assumptions are different and it creates a very strange world indeed.

Remember last week's lesson when Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who had wronged him? Peter thought seven might

be a good number, but no, Jesus told him that seventy times seven would be a better number.

There is a surprising extravagance in the gospel, an unexpected grace that cannot be measured or boxed in by our calculations. In the Bible we learn that God makes the sun shine on the good and the bad. God lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust.

And God pays the eleventh hour worker more than he could have ever expected.

John Westerhoff, a professor at Duke University was called in to help deal with problems being encountered by a school comprised mainly of Native Americans. The teachers at the school said that they were shocked by the lack of morals among the Native American children. She said, "They cheat constantly. We can't make them stop."

So, John interviewed the children and asked them why they all looked on each others' papers during the tests. They told him, "If someone in the tribe knows, he should tell everyone who doesn't know it. If someone in the tribe does not know, he should ask someone who knows."

Westerhoff realized that he was in a culture with a very different orientation from his own. What we have been taught to call cheating, they called cooperation. It all depends on how you look at it.

In the same way, we who are followers of Jesus Christ are reminded by this and other stories that we too look at life in a different way. We are called to live in what amounts to a different culture.

The world tells us that we get what we deserve. Anything less or more is not fair. But, God in Christ tells us that he has a different pay scale. He gives us not what we deserve but what we need.

It is always more than we expect.

Amen.

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