

Wait, What?
Matthew 20:1-16

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I remember the first time I heard this parable [of the Laborers in the Vineyard] as a child. The deacon reader read the scripture, and then the pastor preached the sermon. However, after the Scripture was read, I remember hearing “the last will be first and the first will be last” ... and thinking, wait, what?! That is so completely unfair! So, it is entirely possible that the pastor went on to deliver an amazing sermon unpacking the nuanced meaning of Jesus’ story. However, I have absolutely no recollection of that sermon!

I think that is true (in part) because, like so many who grew up in Granby at that time, I worked tobacco when I was a teenager, and it was hard work. Have you ever worked on a farm? Working for Culbro Tobacco, I was paid next to nothing and have not had an experience since that compares. It was the kind of job that convinced me I wanted to go to college so that I would be able to avoid that kind of manual labor.

So, on hearing the parable, I imagined myself to be like the worker hired first. Perhaps you can also relate to the laborers who worked hard all day, and you feel interior bristling when you hear that they were paid the same wage as those who worked $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$ or even $\frac{1}{12}$ the time that they did. So, I invite you to join me now in giving voice to the injustice by saying (out loud) it isn’t fair! Go ahead, say it: IT ISN’T FAIR!

I hope now that we have acknowledged the injustice we may perceive in the story; we might be able to listen to the message God might have for us today. I don’t want us to miss it, like I did so many years ago on my first hearing.

Many of us hold work and responsibility in high regard. We believe that the responsible person chooses to make something of himself or herself in life. Not so much the slacker. If we’re going to work hard, shouldn’t we be entitled to reap the benefits that flow naturally from our work? Perhaps the landowner worked hard to build his business and felt exactly the same way.

I wonder, are there any of us who hear this story and think of it from the landowner’s perspective? The landowner took time with these men. He hired workers to gather his grapes and weed his fields. He took the risk nobody else would take, that these men might be unskilled and incapable of completing, or worse – unwilling to complete – the job for which they were hired. To be sure, hiring the men for the usual daily wage appears to be quid pro quo: both the landowner and the worker need something from the other, and then each of them benefitted from the arrangement. But the landowner risked his crop by hiring and trusting these men. And hiring more. And more, yet again.

Who did Jesus imagine was first? The worker hired first or the worker paid first? Which was the last? The worker hired last or the worker paid last? Where is the reversal?

Jesus never answered these questions. However, the tone of the parable suggests that the men hired early, who started work at sunrise, were first and would be last. Four more times that day the landowner hired workers. "I will pay you whatever is right", the owner promised each group of workers.

I wonder...Is it conceivable that whatever is right is the usual daily wage for each person, regardless of time spent working?

And so it was. The landowner paid each of the workers exactly the same amount, which in real terms meant each worker received pay according to a different pay scale. Surely the landowner was intelligent enough to appreciate the longer-term problem he was creating by paying workers according to a variable rate. Like so many employment problems, the issue is one of expectations. Those hired first and working the longest, watched the latecomers receive what *they* expected to be paid. Because they had worked longer, they adjusted their expectations upward.

They imagined themselves to be the lucky ones – hired first, having worked the longest, and to be rewarded the most, by this most generous man. Expecting far more than the usual daily wage, perhaps they had already spent the extra money in their minds. Maybe they thought of taking a day off to spend time with their wives and kids. But the landowner stuck by the contract and paid them the quite fair usual daily wage. Because of their inflated expectations and their exhaustion at having worked in the hot sun all day, these men grew agitated. They grumbled against the good man of the house. It just isn't fair. The last should be last, and the first should be first.

This is probably a good time to recall that Jesus is telling the parable to the disciples right after Jesus had a visit from the so-called rich young ruler who wanted to know what to do to get eternal life. Jesus advised him to dispose of everything in order to inherit life. Sell all that you have. The disciples became incredulous, and Peter asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus' answer to Peter provides the interpretation for both of these two chapters (Matt 19 and 20): "For man, it is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matt. 19:26)

All things are possible, but Jesus' answer upset Peter. He was a responsible man. Peter was hired at daybreak, and by the end of it all, he would have worked throughout the entire metaphoric day. He would have given up his entire life for the kingdom. Almost in anticipation of both his life and his death, Peter asked, "we have given up everything to follow you. What will there be for us?" (Matt 20:27)

I was very involved in a women's international, interdenominational bible study in my early adulthood. There was so much about that experience that was so rich. Each week there was a message delivered by the teaching leader. The charismatic nature of her messages offered life and hope and salvation. People's lives were truly changed for the better. However, I started to realize that there was no halfway, because the Jesus of this evangelical organization would not have hired anyone at noonday. You were either in or out, never both. You were hired at 6am or not at all. The general message is that **Jesus is either Lord of all, or not Lord at all.**

Before we find that line offensive, let's recall that Jesus said essentially the same things: you can't serve two masters God and money. You are either in or out. You can't have it both ways. The standard is impossible, but Peter reminded Jesus, I've met the standard: I am loyal. I gave up everything.

Peter wanted to take Jesus literally. "What about us?" asked Peter. We've left everything. The early workers were literal like Peter. They started first thing in the morning so they deserved the most. The last shall be first. Perhaps we can appreciate the dangers of being literal with malleable Scripture.

Isn't the point something like this? None of life with God works the way we think it should. And most of us think of ourselves as the same character in the story, the worker hired first. Only, someone out there has to be the one who was hired last. Someone was hired at the end of the day. Someone needs the same amount of grace that the rest of us have received, and perhaps more – just to be able to feed small children. Who gets to say who is first? Or who is last?

From this perspective, the landowner was not unfair. He was not unjust. He respected responsibility and paid the early men the wage he had promised they would earn.

The landowner was also charitable. Charity, as in love. As in *caritas*, the love of God. Caritas is love so wide and deep that it encompasses even those who cannot make a perfect commitment in Jesus as Lord of all... people who find themselves unable to let go, to sell all they have, and give the money to the poor. The one who cannot find his way to the marketplace at break of dawn, and are lucky to have made it by five pm.

During a conversation with Erica the other day, I asked if there was a formula for how to approach this interim season here at First Church. I wanted to know what method she has determined to be successful from her training and many years' experience as an intentional interim pastor. Her response was so surprising. She told me that there isn't a formula other than being fully present to one another and to the movement of the Holy Spirit as we partner together to be attentive to God's leading toward the future of First Church together. In other words, she pointed to God! My tendency toward perfectionism was not thrilled with her answer. I was hoping for something more concrete. I wanted a particular metric by which we could measure our progress... I wanted to know what we need to DO.

My question was not unlike the question asked by the rich young ruler. He asked, "what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus' answer was not unlike Erica's answer to me. Jesus pointed to God when he said, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good." The rich young ruler went on to explain his goodness to Jesus – he had done it all, kept every commandment, honored his father and mother and even loved his neighbor as himself. He probably cooked at the local soup kitchen, served on teams and work groups at his synagogue and hired workers he didn't really need so that their children would not go to sleep hungry. If there was anyone who was good, it was this man. But he would not have asked the question, "what must I do?", if he really believed deep down that he was good enough. Being so-called 'good' had failed him, and completely. At best, the *being good* philosophy made him a decent human being, but in the deeper matters of the soul – in the question,

Who are you, O God? and *Who am I?* – being good is really a moot point. Where is God? Who is God? Why do I feel inadequate? He had done it all but still felt he was lacking something.

Aren't we all lacking something? It is said that there is a hole in the human heart that only God can fill. Jesus answered the young man, matching answer for question... If you *must* do *something*, Jesus replied, then do this – help the poor. You can never go wrong helping people in need. However, maybe the rich young ruler asked the wrong question.

If you, like me, have perfectionist tendencies, we may be able to relate to the rich young ruler. He wanted a formula, a method to get eternal life or salvation. If we, like the rich young ruler, think we can DO something to earn God's kingdom, we have missed the point. Any formula risks becoming a method, rather than being an avenue to faith. Reliance upon a formula is reliance upon self and it will not work. Only relying on *God* will work. Faith isn't about what we can or must do. It is not about our striving for perfection or even goodness. It is realizing that it isn't even about us in the first place. Faith in *self* is not the faith of Jesus.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first is not prescriptive, it is descriptive. It is this parable of the landowner, which plainly says there are no rules upon which you can rely except the rule that there are no rules. **Rely only upon God.** God saves, not anything else upon which we may attempt to stake our claim – the commandments (like the rich young ruler), leaving it all and making Jesus Lord of all (like the disciples) or working all day long rather than just part of the day (like the workers).

The landowner walked through the marketplace full of compassion, sad at finding displaced workers still unemployed. He knew these men shared the same longing as the aimless rich young ruler. This landowner was a man of grace, a man who distributed the commodity of grace freely to those in need.

We can choose to work in our own power and self-reliance as we navigate our lives, individually and as the community of First Church. Or, we can choose to fully rely on God to reveal God's presence as we ask the deep questions of the soul...who is God? and who is God calling us to be in this time and place? In seeking the answers to those questions, I suspect we will discover a deep well of grace in the process. Amen.

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