

Matthew 20:1-16 ¹"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, 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. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 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?' 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?' ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Matthew 20:1-16

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“Bearing the Burden of the Day”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Sometimes life just isn't fair. So we try to deal with the unfairness the best we can. It reminds of a story about a truck driver. He was short and slight guy, not very big, and he parked his semi at the highway cafe and went inside for lunch. While he was sitting there perched on a stool at the counter, three big, burly motorcyclists came in. Pretty soon, they began to pick on this truck driver. They called him names, grabbed his food away, and laughed in his face. The truck driver said nothing, got up, paid for his food and walked out. One of the cyclists laughed to the waitress, "Boy, he wasn't much of a man, was he?" The waitress replied, "No, I guess not. And he's not much of a truck driver, either," she said pointing out the window. "He just ran over three motorcycles." [from William J. Carl III, Church People Beware!, CSS Publishing Company, in illustrations on Matthew 20:1-16, www.esermons.com.]

It's always satisfying to see a little justice now and again, isn't it? Unfortunately, there are plenty of times when life just isn't fair. That's a reality we have to learn to live with from a very early age. We teach our children to be fair, and when it's not, they protest. And rightly so! One of the biggest struggles I faced as a parent was telling my children to play fair out of one side of my mouth, while telling them 'life isn't always fair, sweetheart' out of the other side of my mouth. What a confusing message.

And it would seem, at first glance in our lesson this morning, that Jesus is really no help at all! He tells a parable about a landowner who is apparently completely inept when it comes to determining his needs regarding personnel. How many workers *does* it take to pull in the harvest?

So this landowner winds up back at the marketplace at 6am, at 9am, at noon, at 3pm, and at 5 o'clock in the afternoon—one hour before quitting time—looking for more and more workers. Of course, you and I know that this isn't really a story about a landowner. It's a story about how God works in the world—always extending his hand to us throughout our lives. Time and again, reaching out to us until we come into the vineyard, the fold, the ship, the Kingdom, whatever we want to call it. It's a story about grace. All the workers get the same reward—that is, they get what they need to live. That's what God's grace is—it's what we need to live in this life, and in the life beyond the grave.

So the problem in this parable isn't the landowner, right? The problem is the workers. The ones who have worked all day grumble about the latecomers getting the same pay. And we understand that! In a business model, there is no better sure-fire way to completely dampen employee morale than to treat employees unfairly. If one were to take this story literally, and push it beyond the bounds of Jesus' telling, one could easily wonder if the landowner will have any success in getting workers at 6am next week. If he pays the same thing no matter when a worker starts, everybody in town is going to wait until 5pm to go work for that guy. His generous nature is going to lead to a real labor shortage—at least for him.

But as we've already said: you can't take it that literally. This is a parable, meant to teach something about the Kingdom of God – namely, God's repeated invitation to repent and join in on what God's doing.. And yet, it still raises the same question: 'Why not wait until the eleventh hour and repent then?' If we all get the same thing, why work all day? Why carry the heat? Why spend our lives giving of our time, our money, and our energy to the church? Why turn the other cheek? Why live a moral existence? Why take the time to pray and read scripture? Why should we care if the west coast is burning? Why should we feel any burden to wear a mask to protect our neighbor from Covid-19? What difference does it make to us if people are starving in East Africa? Why take risks to change the world? I mean, this story tells us quite clearly that life isn't fair, doesn't it? Why bother, when we could be out partying and living it up; when we could be hoarding our resources in order to buy every new toy on the market? Why bother? You may be shocked that I would give voice to such a question, but I'm hardly the first.

Two thousand years ago, it was the Apostle Paul who, after laying before us the riches of God's grace for the sinner, asked in Romans 6:1, 'What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?' Which is basically his way of asking 'why bother?' Why not wait until the eleventh hour?

Folks, lets unpack that question a bit.

Here's where I take issue with it. "The question assumes that a life of sin is more desirable than a life of faith. Why else would we be concerned about waiting until the last moment, right?" [from "When Life Isn't Fair" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.]

But how many people do you know who go out drinking and partying and sleeping around and walking over anyone and everyone who gets in their way just to earn another buck—how many of those people experience true fulfillment? How many of them know peace in their hearts? How many of them know what it means to love and be loved? How many of them like what they see when they look in the mirror? How many of them wake up in the morning and say 'yes! Another day! Yahoo!' How many will look back on their lives with regrets for time lost and opportunity wasted? How many of them feel any hope for themselves or their world? It may be fun for a while, but it doesn't stay that way. It doesn't stay that way.

Some of you might remember the name Carl Perkins. Perkins was a popular rockabilly singer from the 50s and the author of the classic song "Blue Suede Shoes" which was one of Elvis Presley's first big hits. As a guitarist, Perkins influenced many of the next generation of rock 'n' rollers, most prominently, George Harrison of the Beatles. Perkins never quite attained the fame of some of his more notorious colleagues. He once explained it like this: "I never envied Elvis his mansion and all that. All those boys—Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison—they all lost their wives, their families. People say, 'What happened to you, Carl? All of them went on to superstardom. Where'd you go?' I say, 'I went home. And that's a good place to be.'" [Original source unknown, adapted from "Follow That Star" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.]

Some things aren't all they're cracked up to be. "I went home," said Carl Perkins. Well, I'm with him. "No one ever repented on his deathbed of being a Christian," said writer Hannah Moore, and it's true." [from "When Life Isn't Fair" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.] So I don't know about

you all, but I've got no interest in waiting until 5 o'clock to get hired! Lolligagging my life away is not appealing. And I don't want anyone else to lose out on the meat of life either. The life in the master's vineyard is the life.

King Duncan writes: "The real question is: why would anyone want to wait to experience the joy of being in God's presence? The question isn't, why not wait until the end and enjoy sin? The question is, wouldn't it be stupid to live our lives in emptiness, when Christ can come into our lives and give us meaning and purpose and even joy today?" [from "When Life Isn't Fair" by King Duncan, www.sermons.com.] A life lived in greed, in fear, in resentment, in envy, consumed with self-preservation—what kind of life is that? Is that what you'd want? Is that what you want for your family or your kids or your best friend?

But that is what happens when we start comparing ourselves and our circumstances to that of those around us. Which is precisely what those 6am workers were doing. There is another way to look at things—a better way; a healthier way.

This story is told of Yogi Berra. The New York Yankees were at their peak and were negotiating contracts for the next year. A group of reporters interviewed players as they emerged from the owner's office, and one of them asked Yogi Berra about the terms of his contract. In his characteristically, plain-spoken style, he said, "I'm gonna get to play baseball again next year for the Yankees, and would you believe it, they're gonna pay me besides!" [from Philip W. McLarty, *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, in illustrations on Matthew 20:1-16, www.esermons.com.]

What a perfect attitude. Whatever else one might say about Yogi Berra, you can't deny that he was grateful. He knew that he wasn't God's gift to baseball, but rather, that baseball was God's gift to him. So I'll say it again: the problem in this parable isn't the landowner. The problem is the workers. The ones who have worked all day grumble about the latecomers getting it easy.

Friends, "God is not fair. Mark that down. God is not fair. If fairness is the primary attribute you are looking for in God, then don't go to Jesus for instruction. In fact, if what we expect from God is fairness, we wouldn't need Jesus at all. In some churches what I'm going to say would be shocking. But I believe you will understand. This is the heart of the gospel." [Adapted slightly from "God Is Not Fair (Grumbling in the Vineyard)" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.] God is not fair! Thank God! None of us get what we deserve. We all get more. In one sense, we're all eleventh hour workers! We all get way more than we could possibly earn.

There's a wonderful story about "...a large prosperous downtown church, which had three mission churches under its care that it had started. On the first Sunday of the New Year all the members of the mission churches came to the city church for a combined Communion service. In those mission churches, which were located in the slums of the city, were some outstanding cases of conversions—thieves, druggies, bandits, prostitutes, philanderers, and so on—but all knelt side by side at the Communion rail.

"On one such occasion the pastor saw a former thief kneeling beside a federal judge—it was the judge who had sent him to jail where he had served seven years. After his release this burglar had been converted and became a worker at one of the mission churches. Yet, as they knelt there, the judge and the former convict neither one seemed to be aware of the other.

"After the service, the judge was walking home with the pastor and said to the pastor, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?"

"The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't know that you noticed." The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace." The pastor nodded in agreement. "Yes, what marvelous miracle of grace." They were quiet again for a brief time, and then the judge wisely added: "You know, I was referring to myself."

"Somewhat stunned, the pastor gaped at the judge, but the judge went on. "Yes," he said. "You see, it did not cost that thief much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a

history of suffering, neglect, brokenness, and crime behind him. When he finally came to understand that Jesus loved him; died for him, he was overcome with thanksgiving. He knew how much he needed that help. And he knows now that there is salvation and hope and joy for his present and his future. But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, tithe my income, take Communion and so on. I went through the university, earned my degrees, passed the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, it took more grace for God to forgive me for all my pride, my sense of entitlement, my own self-deception to get me to admit that I was no more worthy of God than that convict that I sent to prison. Nothing but the very grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on level with that thief; that I needed grace every bit as much; that Christ went to the edge of hell not just for that thief, but for me.” [6 ¶s adapted from James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*, Tyndale, 1988, p. 257; as used in “It Isn't Fair!” by Brett Blair and Staff, www.esermons.com.]

The judge gets it. He understands the point of this parable. He bears the burden of the day, takes on the labor of love, because a long time ago, another man took on the burdens, not only of the day, but of the world. He went to the cross an innocent victim of politics and powers. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. It wasn't beautiful. But it was love at work. Says Bill Ritter, “Jesus never talked about the cross as something he was "saddled with," so much as something he "volunteered for." [from “A Sermon for Those Whose Buckets Leak” by William A. Ritter, www.esermons.com.] He bore the cross because the love of God bears up when all else is breaking down. There's something about love at work that makes the burden feel like a blessing; that makes the heat of the day strangely warm a devoted heart. Scripture tells us about those who have worked since early morning. We need only look ahead a few chapters in Matthew, to Matthew 25:21, where the master looks at those who have used their talents and multiplied them, and places a gentle hand on their shoulder and looks them in the eye and says, ‘well done, good and faithful servant.’ I, for one, cannot imagine any greater joy than hearing the Creator of the Universe tell me ‘well done’.

So we bear the burden of our day. It's like this. “An elderly patient in a frayed bathrobe shuffled back and forth in a hospital corridor, the aimless movement of one who has outlived his time. Suddenly a name was sounded. His name. He turned to the sound, drawn instinctively toward that name. The name caller was a nurse's aide, pushing a cart filled with pitchers of crushed ice. A mumbled conversation followed. Disbelief, followed by determination, registered on the old man's face. For she had conscripted him to help deliver pitchers to the patients. Need had saved him. Mercy, in a white uniform, had smiled upon him in the nick of time.

“The old man still shuffled. His hands still trembled. And efficiency ratings must have tumbled drastically that afternoon. But you could see in the old man's eyes that he had been touched by grace. Fearing that his stamina could not survive the test, (the burden of the day, the scorching heat) the aide pointed down the corridor and said: "We've got to go all the way to the end of the hall." To which he replied (with an enthusiasm I'd like to half match): "Lordy, I'd go clear to the end of the world for you." [from “A Sermon for Those Whose Buckets Leak” by William A. Ritter, www.esermons.com.]

Amen.