

**Matthew 20:1-16**

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

There are some things I have little patience for, machines and technology are at the top of the list; waiting in lines is right up there as well. In San Francisco, this land of endless restaurants, there were a handful of places you would walk by and there would be a line two or three city blocks long. Is there food that much better, that it is worth waiting an hour in line? Jenna and I would walk by those restaurants and I wonder aloud, “is there some roller coaster in that restaurant that we don’t know about?” I will always take average food *now* over great (and likely overpriced) food I have to wait an hour for. Or amusement parks, when you hit that point in line where it says, “from this point your wait is one hour and twenty minutes”, and that is a for a ride that last four minutes - just not my idea of a great time.

But one time in college, a couple of my friends convinced me to go wait in line for Garth Brooks tickets - it was reportedly his final tour before retiring from Country Music. So the day before tickets went on sale we took our old camping chairs and went to go wait in line - for a day and half - in order to get Garth Brooks tickets. When we got there, we were about halfway down the block from where the ticket booths would open. And there we waited, all long day, and all long night. We had snacks and played cards and hand books that needed to be read for school, but still, it was a lot of waiting and trying to sleep and study.

A couple of hours before tickets were to go on sale, the anticipation was growing, and you started to forget a bit about how terrible all the waiting was. And it kept growing as the minutes ticked closer to getting those Garth tickets. From what we could tell, the line had grown to many city blocks - and the last hour before the ticket counters opened, people were streaming in; who knows how long the line was at that point.

And then, about five minutes before tickets went on sale, the manager of the arena came out and said, “You know folks, we’ve decided that we are going to start at the end of the line. We’re going to go down to the end and start with them; we’ll get to you who have been waiting the longest last.”

The first shall be last, and the last first.

*Just to be clear - this did not happen* - I would never voluntarily wait in any line more than 20 minutes unless absolutely necessary! But this story is about as close as I could come in terms of trying to imagine myself into this parable - trying to inhabit a bit what it might feel like to be the one who works all day in the hot sun, only to be paid the same as one who worked just one hour - to experience the first being last and the last first.

This parable, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is a little like eating lima beans or liver: you know Jesus is right, you know it must be good for you, but that does not make it any easier to swallow. Along with the parable of the Prodigal Son, today’s parable is one of those stories that is so radical that it almost offends us, because it seems to reward those who have done the least while it sends those who have worked the hardest to the end of the line. In the Prodigal Son parable, it is the young son who has blown all his inheritance who is celebrated; in this parable, those who work only one hour are paid the exact same wage as those who work a full day. And here, not only do those who work the least get paid the same, they get paid first. It is just not fair.

Jesus tells this parable in the midst of disciples wondering about their reward. Just before this parable, Peter reminds Jesus that he and his fellow disciples have given up everything to follow Jesus, everything. They have left home and career and family and security and they want to know if it will be worth it – what will their reward be for this life of service and discipleship? And just after the parable the mother of James and John comes to Jesus, and she too wants to know what reward her sons might be getting - will it be sitting at the right and left hand of God?

And so the disciples are curious, what will be their reward for a life of humbly following Jesus - of giving up everything? Will it be becoming known in their community? Will it be being repaid 100-fold for all they have given up? And, in the midst of these questions, Jesus says, “*let me show you what God is like*. Let me tell you a story about love and justice/fairness in the heart of God.” And when he does, when he tells us this story, most of us think, “no, that can’t be right.”

Why does this parable make us say, “no, that can’t be right?” Why is it that when Jesus tells us about God’s sense of justice and abundant love, our gut reaction, like those who worked all day, is “that’s not fair?”

Perhaps it is partly because of how living in this culture has warped our sense fairness and justice. We seem to believe that a hierarchy is both needed and appropriate - it is how we make sense of things and keep order. Throughout history humans have demanded a social order – we have put some on the top and others on the bottom. Different cultures order things differently, but it seems that there always must be a stack. What America and similar countries have provided that was different was the chance to change where you are in that stack, that for most of human history if you were born on the top of the stack you would stay there – if your were born on the bottom, you certainly would stay there. And while in our economy that is still mostly true, there is a possibility to move up and down within that stack. But, we

say, you can only move up the stack through hard work - you can only move up the stack if you are motivated, if you keep your nose to the grindstone. We tell ourselves that all have the power to pull themselves up, IF you earn it. Though the truth is, for most on the bottom, the odds are literally and figuratively 'stacked against you.' But we have this stack, this social order, and I think we have all internalized it a bit more than we care to realize or admit - we believe that we are more worthy of nice things than others; we believe that we deserve our reward, if not now, than at the end of this life journey.

I went to college and grad school. I studied and worked for the grades. I spent three years doing voluntary service. I spend hours each week at a homeless shelter. And I have bought into the myth that I am a bit more deserving; the myth that I should make more than the folks who pick my food; the myth that I should be more compensated for my time than these day laborers who wait outside Home Depot because I have a job that asks me to wear business casual clothing instead of Carhartt. I believe that I am a bit more entitled to God's good things. I think that, despite my best efforts, I am a bit more warped by this worldview than I care to admit.

Or, perhaps this parable feels so unfair to us because we already know that life is unfair. We have known this from the time we were five or six years old and we said to one of our parents, "But, mom, it just isn't fair!" To which they replied, "*Life's not fair.*" And because life is unfair, it seems all the more important that God should be fair. God should be the one authority whom we can count on to reward people according to their efforts, who keeps track of how long and hard we have worked; that God should not allow people to break into the proverbial line ahead of you. God should be the one manager who treats everyone with the utmost fairness. Life may not be fair, but God should be!

This is why a traditional view of heaven and hell is so appealing, because it appeals to my sense of fairness, that somehow, in the end, people who do evil and spread hatred and lie and cheat and steal - they will get what's coming to them. And we who have given our lives to service and tithing and bringing food to people when they're sick and cleaning up after potlucks and making refugee relief kits and teaching Sunday School - we will also get what's coming to us, our eternal reward.

Of course, how much this parable might offend us or make us think that God's justice isn't fair, that all depends on where we believe ourselves to be located in the line. How we hear this parable all depends on where we believe we stand, on how much reward/payment we might be expecting to get. If we know we have caused a lot of hurt and pain in this life, parable probably sounds like good news to us. If we mostly see ourselves, as I do, as people who have tried to be good and just and kind of generous - we might be more uncertain about his parable. The parable certainly sounds different at all different points in the line.

But what if we are mistaken. Maybe we are actually at the end. Maybe our wealth and power and prestige - maybe that actually puts us closer to the end, no matter what we have done in our lives. Maybe the fact that I am part of the world's richest 7.3%, and the vast majority of that wealth goes to pay for just me and my family, maybe that makes me closer to the end of the line than the front. Maybe as far as God is concerned, we are the ones half-way around the block.

We have often been taught of this parable to be about heaven, about who will be there. That this parable might make us pause to think, maybe we will be surprised at who we meet in

heaven - maybe there will be folks there who we thought were “bad” or “evil” people, and we will wonder, “what are they doing here?!”

I can imagine that there are Christians/people of faith in many parts of the world who think the same thing about Americans, that when someone from Equador or Hondoruas or Mexico gets to heaven, they’ll be thinking, “hmmm, I didn’t expect to see any Americans here!” That when someone from Syria or Iran or N. Korea or Yemen gets to fullness of life after this one, they might be surprised to see us there. And if the prophets of the Bible are correct, if Jesus is correct, and God really does have a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, then maybe we are not in the place in line where we believed ourselves to be. Maybe we are actually the ones who have only been working an hour - maybe, because of the relative ease of our lives, because of our wealth and power - maybe it is the poor and marginalized, those who died of hunger and malnutrition; those who died of preventable disease and lack of access to clean water because of what our lifestyles have done to their water supply; those who have died from wars that our country started and that we paid for with our tax dollars and silence. Maybe they will be the ones complaining to God, saying, “look how easy they had it on earth. Look at how hard I had it - my whole life, scraping by, fleeing my home, having to face my child who was always hungry. And look at this guy, he had it so easy - two loving parents, a warm bed, more than enough to eat. Why should he still get the same as me?”

If the prophets were right; if Jesus is right about God, if the first will really be last and the last first, than we should be praising God for this parable. We should feel exceedingly lucky that God’s love is so vast and so gracious and so wide that it almost seems offensive. Perhaps we are

actually the luckiest ones of all. Perhaps we are the most fortunate of all that in God's kingdom, those who worked one hour receive the same as those who worked all day. God's ways are not our ways. And this certainly is good news. Amen.