

Matthew 20 , Laborers in Vineyard, September 2020

Here's a true story. A young college guy, home for Christmas vacation, was urged by his father to put in a few days work at the local factory to make a little money before heading back to school. He was able to work for two days, and at the end of the second day, the factory boss handed out the end-of-the-year Christmas bonuses. This young man's name was called, much to his surprise, and even more to his amazement, he received a Christmas bonus *equal* to everyone else's! So he, who had worked two days, got the same end of year bonus as those who had worked forty-plus hour weeks every week, all year. He was overwhelmed by this generosity, as anyone would be! But, here's the question: how did those *other* factory workers feel about Mr. College Boy getting a bonus equal to theirs after only two days work? There's a decent chance it irked the heck out of them! Isn't that how you would feel in their shoes? So, how you feel about this employer's generosity depends entirely on whose perspective you see it from.

Our Gospel lesson today presents us with this same story, 1st C. Palestine version, and it raises the same question of perspective. A little background might be helpful. In lieu of 1st C. employment agencies, manual laborers would gather in some pre-determined place every morning, hoping to be chosen for a day's work by some landowner or other. Back in the 1st C. these laborers would receive a *darius* for their day's work, a single coin that was just enough to maintain a family in modest circumstances for the day. So, if you were chosen to work, you could just make ends meet. If not, then not. So, in our parable, this particular landowner hires some workers at an early hour for the standard rate. But then he returns at 9, noon, 3 and 5, and each

time, hires more workers. Why? Presumably because he needed them, but also it appears to trouble him to see laborers with families to feed standing idle, unemployed. Those he hires initially he guarantees the standard daily rate of aarius; those he hires later, he assures he will pay them fairly, and they are too grateful for any work and income to quibble about precise terms. It's reasonable to assume they figured they'd receive a pro-rated wage, dependent upon how much of the day they worked. Then comes the surprise ending: the laborers are paid in the opposite order in which they were hired, and *all* of them receive the daily standard rate, even those hired at 5 PM who may only have worked an hour or two. Those hired first, when they realized the late-comers were getting the standard rate, assumed *they* were going to receive a bonus for their longer day, but that didn't happen. It's the college boy story all over again. Those last-hired laborers were ecstatic; the all day laborers felt ill used and treated unfairly, even though they got what was initially promised them. This parable, then, may delight or irritate us, depending on which workers we most naturally assume ourselves to be. So, where do you figure *you* fit into this parable?

Naturally, if we put ourselves in the place of those last hour workers, we would be delighted and grateful for the whole day's wage for our single hour of labor. We would rejoice in receiving such beneficence. But, we don't generally put ourselves in *their* place, do we? Much more naturally, we put ourselves in the place of those all day workers, and we see easily that this is messed up! Why should those late comers be so lucky, so blest, so fortunate? It's pretty hard for us not to resent their unearned good fortune. They don't deserve it. It's not fair!

I think it's quite a natural fit for us to empathize with those all day laborers rather than those who show up at the end. Jesus, as a master storyteller, clearly *intends* that we should do so. He *intends* for this parable to irritate us! And it does. Why else would the landowner in this parable make a point of paying the last hired first and publicly displaying the fact that they were getting paid for the whole day? He could have done it quietly so no one knew what the other's made, but intentionally he goes about it in a way that will raise the ire of the others. In fact, if you recall last week's parable about the unforgiving servant, where we are taught that our forgiveness is to be without limit, you realize that Jesus is on a roll here. In these chapters of Matthew we may well encounter what we might call a series of "points we wish Jesus had never made." Because quite often, God just operates differently than we do. Last week, we learned that forgiveness is to be without limits. That grates on us. And now, the last will be first; the latecomers are treated the same as the all-day sloggers, and we don't like that either! Because how often does it seem that life isn't fair; that others are getting the lucky breaks; that we alone are left to slog along like dutiful, joyless martyrs? While we probably have already figured out that *life* isn't fair by our standards, this parable drives home an even more painful point: *God* isn't fair by our standards either! Worse and worser!

This is a *Kingdom of heaven* parable. It doesn't reflect the realities of this realm; it reflects the realities of God's vision for our world. A world where everyone receives enough for that day's needs, their darius, regardless of how "deserving" they might seem to be to our eyes. And that word, "deserving", is a critical word for our reaction to this vision of the Kingdom of God. We assume the all-day workers are more *deserving* of

betting paid enough for that day's needs than the last-hour workers. Why do we make that assumption? Were the last-hour workers sitting at home, playing video games and eating snicker bars, until they could be bothered to go out and seek employment? Not at all. The parable specifies that they were still available for employment simply because they hadn't yet been hired. The most natural assumption is actually that they stood miserably idle all day, knowing their family was depending on them, hoping for work, and it just didn't happen for them. Was there a reason they didn't get hired? Maybe... or maybe not. It could have been a matter of dumb luck. Or of appearing less strong and able, of being an immigrant from another area, of having a handicap of some kind, who knows? It's entirely possible that they didn't get hired earlier for a series of unfortunate reasons that they may have no control over. Let's translate this story into a different setting for a moment, though, and see if we gain some insight. Because in this story we naturally tend to put ourselves into the shoes of the all-day laborers, the first-picked. What if we put this story into a scenario where we were picked near the *end* instead? It's easy for me to figure out what that would be---I'm going back to the bad old days in elementary school gym class when team captains picked team members for the softball or soccer game. I was always picked near the end, never the beginning. Not because I was inherently unworthy or undeserving, but because I just wasn't a good athlete, I was clumsy. And I felt ashamed of that and wished it wasn't so, but it was. Within that framework, this parable teaches that whether you're the popular athlete who gets picked first for the team or the nerdy musician who gets picked last, in the kingdom of God everyone on the team is accorded the same respect and dignity. Does that put a little different spin on it for us?

And we might translate that into our current culture by saying, whether you are one of the fortunate ones with the right pedigree, right skin color, right gender or one of those who happened to not be born into or inherit those “right” categories, in the kingdom of God, everyone is accorded the same degree of respect and dignity. In other words, the Kingdom of God does not recognize privilege. This is the unappealing truth of this Gospel text: The qualifiers, the privileges, the luck, and yes maybe even the hard work put in, do *not* merit you any greater quantity or quality of God’s grace and mercy; in the Kingdom realm, it is God’s intent that *everyone* is to have enough for that day’s needs, their daily darius, if you will. God is free to be generous. And that’s a far different reality than that which we live in; a different vision than our culture embraces, and it is a radical way of thinking that tends to sit ill with us. God’s generosity is not based on merit or privilege. In God’s vision, whatever category you happen to fall first or last or in between, you are still deserving of enough for that day, still a recipient of God’s mercy and generosity. God is free to do that; free to be generous; God is not bound by our standards of deserving or fairness. Which is a good thing, as it turns out many of our standards are shaped severely by our own particular viewpoint and circumstances and are hardly objective anyways. If we can see this world of ours through God’s eyes, we realize this truth---When it comes to the grace of God, we are all equally in need and equally undeserving, and we ought to be equally grateful that God *isn’t* fair. As one commentator noted---God isn’t fair; God is *more* than fair. And for that we should all give thanks. Amen.

