

Matthew 20:1-16: The Kingdom of Heaven is...Generous

*Sermon for Meadowbrook Congregational Church by Dr. Katelyn Brackney
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“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 a denarius for the day, 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 a denarius. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 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 a denarius?’ 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?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

I remember as a child I would hear that final line, “the last will be first and the first will be last” and use it as a reminder for why it was okay when I was the last in line for something (surely it meant I’d be rewarded later), or even as a taunt with my sisters – I can still hear my sister telling that line to one of my other sisters in an effort, I think, to actually get her way and go first...clearly we had no idea what that line meant. And truthfully, when I read this parable now, that’s not the part that stands out to me like it did when I was younger. Perhaps that’s

because I am actually hearing the story now and not just grabbing what served me best in the moment, or maybe it's because I have more experience with the ins and outs of working and receiving a paycheck, but whatever it is, when I hear this story today, I'm struck not by this line of "the last shall be first and the first shall be last," but by the overall theme of generosity that we see in the actions and words of the landowner. But I think the reason why that theme stands out to me requires a bit of self-reflection.

I don't know if you're like me, but my guess is you are, but I'm the kind of person who really loves when things are as they should be. Maybe not in the same way I do, like with having the "right" spot for things in the dishwasher, but in the way that I care about things being "right" or "just" in regard to fairness. Yes, I know life isn't fair, but that doesn't mean I don't want things to be...Isn't that typical for us humans? We want things to be fair, to be right, to be just...

So we can imagine how some of the characters in the parable we just read might be feeling when things don't seem very fair. Imagine you're there in the scene...a landowner comes into the market early in the day to find day workers for his vineyard, he finds them easily as they gather here daily in hopes of finding work. After agreeing to the rate of pay, they begin to work in the fields...only for the landowner to go back out and find more people. He does this two more times throughout the day, each time finding and sending more workers into the fields. As an observer it would be hard to believe he continually needs more workers, but as one of the workers I imagine each round of laborers was grateful for the opportunity to work, even if it came later in the day, and perhaps if you were one of the other laborers who arrived early you'd be anything from relieved to annoyed at the continual arrival of more people.

Fast forward in the day, and it's time for the manager of the fields to pass out the day's wages. But instead of paying the workers who had been there all day

first, the manager pays the other laborers before them, each receiving a denarius, which was the common pay for a whole day's work. Then, when it's finally time for the early workers to receive their pay they are surprised and irritated to see that they were receiving the *same* as all the others. They saw the generosity of the landowner as he paid the others what they had agreed to and had assumed they would receive more since they had been there longer. Their response seems valid doesn't it? It's not fair. It doesn't sit right with us...Why would the landowner have the manager pay those who had been there all day the same as the ones who arrived only an hour before the end of the day, and everyone in between?

One commentary I read said:

"The parable is offensive to us; it challenges our sense of justice. We empathize with the grumbling workers of verse 12; we too have known capricious employers who rewarded lazy workers more generously than faithful, hardworking employees. But can God be so unfair?"

(Interpretation Matthew Commentary, p.230)

As soon as I read that I immediately had previous experiences in mind where I felt wronged and looked over while others with less experience or time at the place of work received what I had hoped for. Maybe you've been in those spots too...it doesn't feel good, and doesn't sit right with us...But the difference here is that while my experiences led to me not receiving what I wanted or was told I'd get and someone else getting it instead, in this parable the workers still receive what they had agreed upon with the landowner. No one is given more than the other, and no promises of payment were broken. So if we are thinking of the phrase I held onto as a child, perhaps instead of "the last shall be first and the first shall be last," it should really say, "the last shall be first, and the first shall be the same?" ([Working Preacher - Karl Jacobson](#))

It is a reversal of our expectations, of what we understand to be right and fair. Which really, when we think about it is a lot of what God is up to and what the kingdom of God looks like...it's offering hospitality to strangers not just those

we know and love, it's caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the refugee, extending forgiveness, working together toward flourishing for all people and creation, even when we don't feel like someone "deserves it" or has earned it. If God waited for us to earn God's abundant grace, we'd probably be waiting...a while...but God is generous and the kingdom of God embodies this frustrating and beautiful generosity.

But that frustration piece causes me to pause, because if I'm frustrated by God's generous giving of good gifts, I need to reflect on why. What is behind that frustration? That feeling that it isn't fair or right for someone to receive the same for less work? What am I afraid of? What are we afraid of? Is it a fear of God's generosity? Or perhaps a fear that we are not as generous? Perhaps it's because we want exclusivity? To feel special? To feel called or selected like the day workers were by the landowner? Perhaps it's a fear of scarcity? That there isn't enough, even though God tells us again and again not to live in fear but rather in freedom and abundance...There are a lot of tough reflection questions there....but I hope that if this story pokes at you and you join with the laborers in feeling that the landowner's actions are unjust or unfair, that you take some time to examine why.

Another commentary I read said, "As the ultimate "landowner," God will use what has always belonged to the Creator for the good of all even if humans fail to view the world through God's eyes. In Jesus' earlier words: God's perfection is exemplified in God's rain on the just and the unjust (cf. 5:48). The landowner's question in the parable is Jesus' punchline for the story: "Are you envious because I am generous?" ([Working Preacher - Emerson Powery](#))

While the laborers, and perhaps our own, sense of justice is violated, it isn't because the landowner/God is leaving the early workers out and not giving what was promised, but because we are being challenged by God's generosity that

causes us to come to terms with the ways God's sense of justice and "rightness" looks different and more abundant and gracious than our own, as well as the difference between the world we currently find ourselves in and the kingdom of God.

God is not bound by our limited understanding, insight, or capacity. And God's work in the world toward restoration and fullness, toward the kingdom of God being on earth as it is in heaven, is sometimes going to surprise us, maybe startle us or upset us because the table is always longer, the gifts given are always more abundant. "God's kingdom is marked by grace beyond our imagining and generosity beyond our deserving." ([Working Preacher - Kimberly Wagner](#))

My hope is that our eyes may be opened to where God's generosity is on display, and when we find ourselves resistant to God's continual welcome and call for others to join in the work of the kingdom, that we push against the learned behaviors of fear and scarcity, and lean into that gracious abundance where there is always more than enough for all.

Amen