

Matthew 20: 1-16

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Sunday July 1, 2012

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Don't you just love a story? How many of you can remember a time when you read a story out loud.? How many of you can remember someone reading their story to you? How many of you are good storytellers? How many of you enjoy listening to a story? For most of us some of our favorite memories are times when a parent or grandparent or sister or teacher read to us or told us stories. Jesus was a great storyteller. This summer our worship theme is the stories or Parables of Jesus. Jesus was a great storyteller. He loved to sit down with his friends and tell some stories. Not all of the stories were easy to understand at first. Some stories made you go Huh? Some stories made you feel loved. Some made you scratch your head in wonder. Some make you mad. Today's story makes most people mad.

A householder went out to find day laborers. He hired some at dawn and promised to pay them the full day's wage. They were happy and they started to work in the man's vineyard. They worked hard, and as the sun rose in the sky the day grew hotter and hotter. They knew they would be warm but they worked on, knowing that they were to be compensated. Then at nine o'clock and noon and 3 o'clock he hired more workers and agreed to pay them each what was right and proper. There are lots of assumptions going on in this. The men have been offered a day's wage and they are all happy. They assume that the other workers are being paid differently from them. They assume that the people who work the longest will get the most. They know what the man has told them but nothing else. Then at the end of the day, he called the workers in to pay them. He decided to call those who started last in to be paid first. Even those who came to the vineyard late in the day received a full day's wage. They went

away happy. Then he took the workers who had been there half a day, and paid them a full day's wages. Then he took those who had been there all day, and he paid them what he had promised them- a full day's wages. What is Jesus saying here and what does it mean for us?

In the first place, don't keep score. The people who worked all day were angry. Did they have a reason to be angry? They worked a full day and they were paid exactly what they expected. The householder was true to his word. But they were ripped. Why? Because even though they got paid the full amount they felt they deserved it but the day laborers who came at the end of the day did not deserve the day's wage.

They would have been happy taking their wages and going home tired. They would have been happy except for the people they thought got a better deal. They resented someone else's windfall.

Keeping score –

We all do it. We look over the kitchen table at our siblings and think they are getting away with something. We call out students in school who seem to be taking shortcuts in their homework. We watch out co-workers like hawks to be sure that the folks who joined the company after we did are not nipping at our heels or getting ahead of us. **Who is hurt when we keep score? Mostly, us.**

The United States will celebrate our national birthday this week with fireworks and parades from sea to shining sea. Needham has one of the finest displays of town celebrations I have ever seen. The streets are lined with folks and people see their neighbors. As we pause to observe this holiday we are increasingly aware that our country is in a time of transition. People of European descent are very aware that people of color are expected to be the majority in this country in just a few years. Cloaked in this concern is denial, of the fact that this country was initially inhabited by native people of color. We are a land of immigrants. Sadly, the immigration policy debate in the United States sounds a little like

this parable of Jesus. People who came early in the day and enjoyed the benefits of working in this vineyard- seem to be jealous of those who came later but still were able to find the same resources.

In the second place, life is not fair. You need to get over that. Are you a parent who tries to make things fair? How hard is it? In the end what most parents want is to see all their children thrive. It takes time to see that encouraging their success might involve a different approach from complete fairness.

Another parable that is so complex you could do a month on it is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You remember a man had 2 sons and one asked for his share of the inheritance – the will- while his father was still living. This guy squandered it. When he came home the prodigal was wiser and humbler, and broken. His father welcomed him home and re-instated his wealth. The elder brother was furious. This is not fair. I have worked here all these years loyally, and you never threw a feast for me. Many of us feel this tension in our gut. It is that fresh and real for us.

Lots of passages in the Bible wrestle with the question of whether life is fair. The Lord loves fairness. We need life to be fair. We want a system that rewards virtue and punishes evil. Yet the rain falls on the just and the unjust.

The prophet Ezekiel talks about the problem that the wicked prosper and the just don't get enough credit. Then he reminds the people that God takes no pleasure in the death or punishment of a wicked person. What pleases God is that they change and grow. God is like a good parent.

Finally, God is gracious with us. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a vineyard where everyone comes at a different time and they all get paid the same wage. What do we take from this? God is gracious. Sometimes we forget that and we think life is not fair. Often it isn't fair in the young

definition of fair. But the good news here is that we have all had times when we were the prodigal son. We did things we were ashamed of and God has forgiven us.

Though many of us identify with the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, it is good to remember those times when we were turned away from God's goodness and wandered or got lost.

This week I spent a lot of time with my brother. As the eldest in my family I suffer from the pride of those who strive to do the right thing. My brother was born with Down Syndrome so he has spent his life, trying to keep up in a fast-paced world. If there is a lesson in this week for me, it is all about slowing down. On Thursday afternoon I told him I was taking the afternoon off to do a duck tour. I suggested we walk to the green line from our house. He said he was up for it, but he went slowly. We purchased tickets and found that we were the last ones on tour #29. It was crowded, and I worried that we would not find seats together. He wanted to get a picture. That took more time. As we boarded the duck, at first I could not see any seats, except 2 way up front. No one else wanted to sit with the driver, so we did. We had the best time. James laughed with abandon. He thought the captain's jokes were so funny. When some of the children got a chance to drive on the Charles River, the captain offered James a turn, too. Coming along at a whole different pace all week, we managed to have a time to remember.

Paul writes, None of us is saved by our own deeds or even our admirable work ethic. It is God's graciousness that redeems us. In God's kingdom the last will be first and the first will be last. The sooner we learn to see the graciousness in that, the closer we will be to that kingdom.