

Matthew 20:1-16 *Late to Work*
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabam
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Matthew 20:1-16

1 "For the realm of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 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?' 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard.' 8 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.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.' 13 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? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am 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."

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us: Thanks be to God.

I'll never forget the first time we took our oldest child to Saigon 39, our favorite Vietnamese restaurant in Kansas City. Sam and I both ordered a stir-fried

combination noodle dish, but since three-year-olds are not known for their adventurous eating, I ordered our son some plain rice.

Well, as soon as our food arrived, he started pointing to my plate. “What is it?” he asked, indicating some mystery morsel. “I’m not sure,” I said, expecting that to be the end of it. But he said, “Can I try it?” So he did. And then he went on to point to piece after piece—“What’s that? And that?” until he had eaten pretty much all of my meal, and left me with the plain rice.

When he was finally full, he sat back, looked around, and said, “Can we just live here?!”

Maybe it’s just my own cooking, but that’s not typical of what would happen when something I set on the table at home prompted my kids to ask, “What is it?”

Instead, it usually sounded more like the tone we hear in the Israelites’ voices as they encountered manna for the first time: “What is it?”

I’m sure I’m right about the tone, because the Israelites were not feeling this adventure that God had sent them on. Instead, they were longing for the things they were used to back in Egypt. Mind you, it was awful back in Egypt, but still, there is something in each of us that clings to the familiar— especially when everything around us is in flux.

We like to feel like we understand how things work—even if they don’t work that well. We like to know what to expect—even if experience tells us not to expect too much.

But this parable from Jesus about the workers in the vineyard does not cater to our preference for predictability, because nothing in this story happens the way we expect.

In the parable, it's time for the harvest, and the owner of the vineyard goes to the marketplace early in the morning to hire a crew of laborers. They agree on their wages, and he sets them to work. Then he goes back to the marketplace four more times over the course of the day—at 9am, noon, 3pm, and 5pm—bringing back more workers each time.

Then, when evening comes, he calls the last arrivals to get their pay, first.

And those who started at 5pm—right before quitting time—get paid the same amount as those who started in the fields at sunup. Not surprisingly, those who were there all day are pretty miffed.

Now, let's have a virtual show-of-hands. How many of you, when you hear this story, identify with those lucky latecomers?

How many of you identify with the workers who toiled all day?

Even though I can't see you, I'm going to assume that, like me, most of you raised your hands for the all-day workers. That was Jesus' assumption, too—because you'll notice that he doesn't focus on the reactions of the latecomers when they are given a full-day's pay. Isn't that strange? They must have been overwhelmed with joy and surprise and gratitude, but Jesus doesn't even mention that. Instead, he tells the story through the viewpoint of the all-day workers, as they watch each progressive group get paid a full-day's wages for a partial-day's work. He notes their growing excitement from assuming that, if those others are getting full pay, then *they* must be going to get even more.

And he relates their shock and anger when all they're handed is the same amount that everyone else got—the wage they agreed to when they went to work that morning.

But when they complain, the owner counters that he's not cheating them, he's just being generous with the others—but I get it. I'd be upset, too!

But why is it that we all, automatically, identify with those poor, work-worn drones. Isn't that odd? There are lots of players in this story. Besides the early arrivals, there are also those who were hired at 9am and noon, those who were hired at 3pm, and, of course, those lucky few who showed up just moments before quitting time.

And then, there's the owner, standing there with a disgusted look on his face as his act of pure generosity somehow gets twisted into something ugly.

But what did he expect? None of us likes to work hard, then watch other people get things they didn't earn. It goes against our sense of fairness. That's why politicians can easily drum up anger against social welfare programs by conjuring up phantom figures like The Welfare Queen. Millions of people might be barely making it on public assistance, but the thought that one person might be gaming the system can get us to cut essential lifelines just so our tax dollars won't go to someone undeserving.

Undeserving.

So, like the Israelites in the wilderness, holding that manna at arms' length, we look at this model for community that Jesus presents, and we think "*What is that?!*" Could that possibly be what Jesus really means?

It could *never* work for everyone to get what they need, regardless of whether they earned it! This parable sounds so impractical, and even a little Socialist. If everyone were given what they needed without having to work for it, then *no* one would work, right?!

Well, interestingly, our country just conducted an impromptu experiment that tests that very assumption, with the \$600 extra that was given to the unemployed during the first months of the pandemic. And, surprisingly, according to *The New York Times*, “There has been striking agreement among conservative and liberal economists who have studied the issue that the \$600 supplement has deterred few workers from accepting a job.”¹

A job isn’t just a paycheck. A job is security. A job is purpose. A job is dignity.

Which raises the question: what are we assuming about the late arrivals? That they had just rolled out of bed at noon or three or five? What’s more likely is that they’ve been standing in the marketplace all day, desperate for work, but with no takers. They’ve been watching the sun slip slowly across the sky, while their hopes of bringing dinner home to their hungry families were slipping away with it.

And what are the assumptions we’re making about ourselves? That *we* are deserving.

And so I ask you: have we actually earned everything we’ve received? Did we create our own lives, change our own diapers, pay for our own schooling? Was there never a day that we shirked our chores, but still pulled our chair up to the dinner table that night, expecting to be fed?

The thing is, there is a very tenuous connection, at best, even in our “merit” system, between how hard we work, and how much we earn. There are so many people working multiple jobs, and still unable to keep a roof over their heads; while there are others with secure incomes and full benefits, pointing fingers

¹ Patricia Cohen, “Do Jobless Benefits Deter Workers? Some Employers Say Yes. Studies Don’t.” (*The New York Times*, September 10, 2020). Accessed September 18, 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/business/economy/unemployment-benefits-hiring.html?referringSource=articleShare>

disapprovingly at the poor, while they, themselves, have never really even broken a sweat.

So, does Jesus really mean to say that everyone should just get what they need, regardless of whether they've "earned" it? I'd say yeah. Because look at what prompts him to tell this parable: It's when Peter points out all the things he's given up to follow Jesus, and asks what his reward is going to be. And Jesus responds that his reward will be getting to sit with him in paradise. Which is great, except, then he adds that everyone else who follows him—all those johnny-come-latelies (like us)-- will also get the same reward. And then he launches into this parable.

Consider, too, just what it is that all those laborers in the parable receive at the end of the day: whether they were early or late, what they got wasn't a million-dollar jackpot: it was a day's wages. The basic amount that every person needed just to have food and shelter for themselves and their families.

So, apparently, that's what Jesus wants for everyone, and it's what he wants *us* to want for everyone, too, because it's what he taught us to pray for: "Give us this day our daily bread." *Us*, not "me," because it's everyone; *daily bread*, because it's the basic needs of each person; and *give us*—not "help us earn," but "*give us this day our daily bread*," because that's the only way to ensure that everyone will receive it.

So maybe this vision makes us squirm a little. Maybe it feels uncomfortably strange and unfamiliar. Maybe we find ourselves holding it out in front of us and asking, "What is that?"

But maybe, if we consider how very broken and unfair our own, dog-eat-dog system is, we might think about, at least, giving it a try.

Who knows: if we just tasted Jesus' way of life where everyone, finally, has what they need, we might find ourselves sitting back, full and satisfied, and asking, "Can we just live here?"