

Reckless Reward

Matthew 20:1-15

September 18, 2011

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them to the vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock he did the same. 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?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

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.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.’

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? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

There is a street corner, just a few stones throws from here on Fairfield and Southern, where – every morning – a group of people show up to find work. The pickup trucks start coming by around 5:30 in the morning, taking the strongest looking workers. The work varies – though it is mainly construction and agriculture. Late in the afternoon the pickup trucks stop back by that street corner to drop off the workers...their pockets a little heavier with cash from their labor.

A few years ago, I went on a mission trip to Immokolee, Florida where there are many variations of street corners like the one on Texas Avenue. One day of the trip, our group spent the day as the folks on those street corners did – in a field picking blueberries. At first it was fun. Working with the land; the satisfaction of seeing your progress as the buckets we carried filled up with the fruit that we picked. I don't suppose we even noticed the August heat of South Florida until we had been working for, oh, 30 or 45 minutes. Around that time, it appeared to us as though the rows of blueberry bushes had grown exponentially.

Mercifully, right around our lunch break, the rains came and we made our way back to town. About 7:00 that night, after we had showered, eaten supper and had some down time, we watched as trucks pulled back into parking lots in the deserted part of town and hundreds of illegal immigrants piled out the back to head to their crowded homes.

That night during our devotion we read the scripture you just heard from Matthew. Our level of identification with those first laborers in the story was high. To stand in line with people who had worked one hour, after we had worked since the sun rose, and to be paid the same wage? No, sir! That was the making of an insurrection!

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Two things happen before Jesus tells this story. Both should cause a little squirming in the pews, because there is a lot of “us” in each of them.

First, a person in the top income bracket with a lot invested in the stock market asks Jesus what he must do – besides follow all the commandments – to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to liquidate his assets, give the money to the poor, and follow in his footsteps. Once this person walks away, unable to part with his stuff, the disciple Peter pipes up. “Hey!

We've followed the commandments, and left all that we had to follow you! What kind of perks come with that kind of commitment?"

Both questions are motivated by finding out what is in it for them. To both, Jesus tells this parable about the vineyard.

Suffice it to say, the owner of the vineyard is not going to be on the cover of *Fortune Magazine* for his business model. Six times, he commits more capital by going back to the labor pool to bring extra workers to this vineyard.

Maybe it was just that good of a crop...one that was so abundant the need for laborers continued throughout the day. Yet it is interesting that in the parable Jesus tells, nothing is mentioned about the yield of the vineyard. In fact, it almost seems as if the owner doesn't give a hoot about what comes out of the ground, but only about the workers in the field.

When it comes time to pay the workers, there is another interesting wrinkle. The usual daily wage was a denarius – enough to live on, but not enough to move you up the economic ladder. That first group of workers were expecting this payment; indeed, that is what they signed on for early in the morning – the usual daily wage.

But when the manager comes out to settle up, and starts at the opposite end of the line with those who have only worked an hour, those who have worked since the early morning have raised expectations. Or, perhaps another way to look at it is, they have an increased sense of entitlement.

The moment of outrage comes when the early workers are paid. There may not have been so much outrage if they were paid first...maybe they wouldn't have noticed that the late workers were paid the same amount if they hadn't had to wait and watch. It seems clear that the choice of the landowner to build up the suspense for these first workers was for the purpose of making the point.

That point being the freedom of the vineyard owner to do what he wants with his property. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

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When you get right down to it, our sense of what is fair is based on our idea of what we think we deserve.

My bride, and your children's ministry director, Lindsey Wells Peery has a strong sense of what is fair. Over nine years of marriage, we have had more than one conversation about our different interpretations of "fair" when it comes to the balance of housework, child care, and bank accounts. I'll let you guess who usually wins those arguments...

Much of our national conversations about the economy, and the debt limit, and the role of government are based on competing ideas about what is fair and what people deserve or think they should deserve.

Within our life together as the church, the issue of fairness comes into play. How many times can one circle have flower duty? What about next year's new members who will never get a pledge card for the building project, nor the programs they enjoy?

But on a more fundamental level, we church folk have a tendency to look with some suspicion at the back of the line who are receiving their reward: those non-denominational types; those storefront Christians; those bedside confession, or one-time confessional believers; those cotton-candy Christians; those do-gooders who don't even know what they believe and can't articulate a single, orthodox thought...we have a tendency to look with suspicion at them at the back of the line getting their reward. Watching, as they have an experience of grace showered upon them by the Master – with us wondering what they ever did to deserve this gift and how much more the Master will appreciate us.

And don't you know – all we get is what we need: the knowledge that we are a part of the Master's workforce, and the provision to get us through one more day.

That's what we get...the same thing as those in the back of the line.

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One of the earliest pieces of commentary written about today's scripture was by an early church Father named Origen. Origen was from Alexandria and he wrote at the first part of the 3rd century.

He read this parable that Jesus told as an allegory about the covenant people of God. That first set of workers, those called to the vineyard at first light, represented the generation of believers from Adam and Eve to Noah. The second set, from Noah to Abraham. The third set, from Abraham to Moses. The fourth set, from Moses to King David. The fifth set, from King David to Christ.

Guess where we are in that line?

Thinking about it this way, maybe we should be less concerned about who does or doesn't deserve the reward of Grace that the landowner freely distributes.

Maybe we shouldn't worry about who shows up late, and perhaps even, whether they have a clue that they are working in the field of the master.

For we are here – all of us, chosen and treasured, given enough, assured of our reward – and in the field.

And as long as there are mouths that need feeding, souls that need tending, injustices that need fixing, lonely who need comforting, sick that need healing, and idle people who need welcoming...there is work to do.

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