

Matthew 20:1-16
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
September 1, 2024

The Invitation to be Last

I never had to teach any of my children to say these words: “That’s Not Fair!” But that is what comes up for most people when they read this parable.

At dawn, a landowner goes looking for workers to help with the harvest.

6 a.m. — The landowner finds some people to work and negotiates with them a fair day’s wage. They agree and begin working.

9 a.m., Noon, and then 3pm. — The landowner, still in need of more help, finds people and agrees to pay them “whatever is right.”

5 p.m. — The landowner goes out and finds people that say no one has hired them, so he puts them to work as well.

6 p.m. — Quittin’ time. Stop working and collect your wages, the last will be paid first.

At the end of the day there are five groups of workers:

The 6 a.m. people have worked 12 hours.

The 9 a.m. people have worked 9 hours.

The 12 noon people have worked 6 hours.

The 3 p.m. people have worked 3 hours.

The 5 p.m. people have worked one hour

Let’s say the daily wage is \$15/hour, for a 12-hour day. That’s \$180 for the day.

The 5 p.m. folks are paid first. Lo and behold, the 5 p.m. workers get paid \$180! Now, what do you think the 6 a.m. folks at the end of the line are thinking? They are doing math! “Woot Woot! We stand to make over \$2000 today! That will work! Drinks on me!”

The 3 p.m. people step up. \$180. The noon folks: \$180. 9 a.m. folks: \$180. When the 6 a.m. folks step up, they stare down at their paycheck: Only \$180. “That’s not fair!” “This is no way to run a railroad!” This is an economic NIGHTMARE. For their mindset, and for ours.

The landowner's justification for this outrageous payscale is simple:
'Friend (and the actual word here for friend is edgy, more like "look pal"), 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 much to talk about!

Let's put it in three categories.

An Invitation.

The invitation is to be last, especially for those of us with privilege — status, health, abilities, and advantages. From a power perspective, those picked first are often the privileged: those with social power, documentation, language skills, and physical or mental ability.

Who gets picked in the middle of the day? People who have less power than those picked first.

Who gets picked at the end of the day? The ones passed over by everyone else — the marginalized, those seen as having nothing to offer or contribute to society. Yet Jesus approached them, saying, "You're central to my work. Come and join me, and I'll pay you the same as the privileged." This, of course, angers the privileged.

Jesus' way of saying I'm switching up the entire power balance! Some people get more of a voice than others. And that makes people who are used to having their way, MAD.

Yet, Jesus does this ALL THE TIME. Look for it. In almost every story, he privileges the experience, the stories, the lives, of those on the margins and seeks to give the microphone to them because it is from those experiences where wisdom, where seeing on a different plane, can turn the world upside down.

Jesus is challenging people who look like me and born with my social location to a different way of being in the world. "Your path to liberation is in being last! Your connection to everyone around you is in being last. You have an irreplaceable and important role to play and it is in being last. I'm inviting you to be last. The ones who have always been overlooked? I'm empowering them to be first."

A Challenge.

Jesus makes our brains hurt! Because Jesus calls us, when we are ready to hear it, out of our dualistic thinking.

We start in life with rules and either/or thinking to navigate life. But as we experience the contradictions in ourselves, others, and life — often through great love or great suffering — we shift to both/and thinking. Because at some point in life you realize you can do it all ‘right’ and still be left questioning the fairness of life. The fairness of God.

- I raised this child with a set of values, and now they have no interest in those values.
- I loved this spouse with faithfulness and they have betrayed me.
- I took good care of my body, and I’m being ravaged with a disease.
- I played by the rules my whole life and I see horrible people’s careers skyrocket.
- I worked really hard at a craft and Covid 19 has me starting a new career from the bottom.
- I looked up to this person and they have turned out to be as big a mess as I am.
- I cared for my child, my friend, my spouse, and now they are tragically gone.
- Have you hit the wall yet?

Parables like this are your friend, revealing the nature of our existence as complex and contradictory, not easily compartmentalized. The dualisms — good-evil, clean-unclean, fair-unfair — no longer work.

I’ll never forget the day my therapist said to me “You are capable of being sad and ok at the same time. You can hold both of those together Fred”. I wanted to cry. I’d preached about God’s love my whole adult life but never saw that both suffering and joy, as Juergen Moltman said it, coexist in God’s love. Life isn’t fair or unfair—it simply is. And when we’re fortunate, that simple “isness” feels like Grace, like a Gift.

Are you exhausted by trying to cram life as you experience it into neat binaries?

Can you allow yourself to live in a world that isn't black and white after all but rather both/and? It is literally baked into Christian spirituality as it asks us to believe Jesus was both divine and human, that God is one and three. This math isn't taught in schools. But life invites us to embrace it.

A Picture.

God is portrayed as a landowner who couldn't stop pursuing workers. Couldn't stop interrupting lives. Couldn't stop employing. Couldn't stop coming for his people.

This means, thank God, that the Kingdom of God is not just for the hard workers who keep their nose clean. It's not just for the dutiful and diligent. It's. For. Everybody. Even that person putting up horrible memes on FB. Them too.

Because God hires the 6 a.m. crowd and the 5 p.m. crowd and pays them the same.

The only question is, can you forgive God for being so generous? Have you forgiven God for being so generous?

Here's why you can: Jesus on the cross. Jesus up there being LAST. The great injustice, the murder of God in the flesh, is transformed as the great revelation of God as co-suffering love and radical forgiveness, with the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross as a sign of the very love of God reaching out to us all.

There is room for everyone under God's Reign. Even those who wake up at 5 p.m. and work for only an hour. Amen.