

5 O'clock Hires

Philippians 1: 21-30

Matthew 20: 1-16

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Philippians 1; 21-30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20: 1-16

“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 into his 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.”

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“It's not fair!”

How easy it is to side with the vineyard workers who labored all day in the sweltering sun, whose exhausted bodies glistened from sweat, who dealt with pests and harvesting and back

aching manual labor for a full day, yet were paid exactly what those who worked just one hour received.

It's not fair. It's unjust. It's exploitation.

Surely this cannot be what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Yet it is indeed as Jesus takes this injustice and inequity one giant step deeper, twisting the unfairness even more. The landowner could have paid those who had been working since dawn first, and let them be on their way, and then moved on through to the 5 o'clock hires, but instead he specifically paid the last workers first in the sight of all the others.

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

But we want to protest. It's not fair to the workers, and it surely doesn't make good business sense. This will inspire people to be lazy, to cut corners on honesty and quality, if the pay is the same no matter how much or how little effort are involved. Why be motivated to work hard, to make a commitment of time and body, only to be treated and compensated as those who barely had time to get started on the job? Those who work harder and longer and filthier and deeper in the trenches have no more value in the system than those who stroll in just before quitting time, who barely have time to take off their jacket and begin the hour's tasks.

In righteous anger we protest on behalf of the exploited all day workers.

We think of our news just this summer of strikes—threatened or actual— as actors, writers, auto makers, hotel workers, health care staff, Starbucks employees, Southwest pilots, Amazon drivers, and fast food workers, all rebel against wages that have not kept up with the cost of living and benefits are decreasing although workers work harder and longer due to the ongoing labor shortage. We think of the unfair challenges they and their families face for weeks, for months, for years, and now enough is enough.

We want fairness, that sense of predictability, control, order, of reward for good and consequences for the bad. Even though it is far from true life, it's a cliché that 'you get what you deserve.'

We hear this parable and wonder how can Jesus who teaches and preaches a kingdom of welcome, hospitality, grace and equality; Jesus who will later send his disciples out with instructions to "Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid,"¹ say that the kingdom of heaven is like this vineyard owner.

But Jesus the master storyteller, has a parable plot twist. In fact, he has four of them, and that apparent emphasis on fairness is only the first of them.

Jesus' message is not about the vineyard workers but about the landowner, and that landowner's generosity.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

Jesus is talking about grace, the grace of the vineyard owner, the grace of God's kingdom. We are called to look not only at the labor of the early morning workers, but at the needs, the circumstances, of all who followed at nine, and noon and three and five, all who needed a daily wage to support their families.

Michael Marsh, in *Grace in a Wage Based World*, asks, "What happens though when divine goodness trumps human fairness? You get today's parable. Today's parable suggests wages and grace stand in opposition to each other. They are two opposing world views. The degree to which this parable strikes us as unfair is the degree to which our life and world view is wage based. A wage based world view allows little room for grace in our own lives or the lives of others.

Grace is dangerous. It reverses business as usual. “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” ...Grace looks beyond our productivity, our appearance, our dress, our race or ethnicity, our accomplishments, our failures. Grace recognizes there is more to you and who you are than what you have done or left undone. Grace reveals the goodness of God. Wages reveal human effort. Grace seeks unity and inclusion. Wages make distinctions and separate. Grace just happens. Wages are based on merit. The only precondition of grace is that we show up and open ourselves to receive what God is giving.”ⁱⁱ The grace, love and mercy of God are offered equally to everyone, absolutely everyone.

Paul understood this as even from his prison cell he could see his life as ‘fruitful labor,’ as positive, productive work that can be done as a life of faith, as a way of living out and living into the gospel.

Grace over fairness was Jesus’ second parable plot twist.

The third twist is that the vineyard owner keeps going out to search for more laborers, that God keeps on going out into the world looking for more and more to receive this grace. God seeks out the eager hard workers just as much as the hesitant, the unsure, the slower workers, because divine grace and love are for everyone, and in equal measure. God’s kingdom is not ours to divvy out. It’s not for us to decide who’s earned it, since none of us do, or can, earn it. This was proven most in the death and resurrection of Christ that is for all people, not just those with certain skills or attributes, but for all. Christ calls us to make disciples, not comparisons. Christ calls us to work in his vineyard, for the harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few.ⁱⁱⁱ

The fourth twist is a bold demonstration that the last will be first and the first shall be last. When the all day workers saw the vineyard owner’s wages to the 5 o’clock hires, they immediately saw the generosity, and expected to receive more than just a denarius. Stepping up to the pay table they were ready to thank the landowner as they wondered just how much more they would be given. They certainly did not expect to hear, “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?”

“Are you jealous because I was generous with these other workers?” Jesus has taught us how to get along with each other, and now he is teaching us how to get along with ourselves when we begin to think we deserve more than we’re getting, when we start comparing ourselves to others, and when we wonder why they get all the blessings while we do all the work.^{iv}

One parable, four lessons.

- 1.) God’s generosity means more than our understanding and expectation of fairness
- 2.) God’s kingdom is grace above all else
- 3.) God keeps on seeking out more people to share this grace
- 4.) God keeps a level playing field as the first are last and the last are first..... Amen.

ⁱ Luke 10:7

ⁱⁱ <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2011/09/18/grace-in-a-wage-based-world-a-sermon-on-matthew-201-16-proper-20a/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 10:2

^{iv} <https://pastorsings.com/2014/09/20/a-different-pay-scale-sermon-on-matthew-201-16/>