

“Late but equally hungry”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA

I wanted to start this morning with a parable that Jesus shared with his disciples. In Matthew 20 Jesus tells us a story that starts like many others “the kingdom of God is like...” and then goes on to talk about a farmer who hires out help for the day. He talks about hiring people to work for a denarius. I’m going to switch it into today’s terms. Let’s imagine I have some work I need done, for example some landscaping project I have. I need a couple of workers to help me so I hire them for \$70 each for a day’s work. We’re making a garden path, so I have them working the first few hours clearing out weeds and even moving soil. It’s hard work and they are earning every penny with the sweat they’ve poured into it. Then I see the day is getting away from us and there’s no way that I’m going to get it done before dark so I decide to go hire another person, and I agree to also pay this person \$70 but now for just a half a day’s work. And we’re moving gravel and pavers, trying to build this complicated pathway. Then three hours after that I decide I just have to hire one more person to complete the job to get it done today, and I also offer this new worker \$70 even though they will probably only work two hours. Now the two people I hired in the morning are upset because I’m paying these other two workers the same that I’m paying them even though it is for less hours of work, especially the last person I hired. When they get angry and complain though, the only explanation I offer them is this—it’s my money, can’t I be generous when I want to with whomever I want to?

It’s a sound argument, right? Many in my spiritual tradition grew up with this illustration to mean that those of us who have been living a “Christ-centered” life for many, many years cannot be upset with those who only choose to live this way later in their own lives. The thinking was that though perhaps I have spent my entire life serving God, making personal sacrifices time and time again, I cannot be mad at the person who lived like a sinner, enjoying the pleasures of the earth only to turn to God in their last days, but yet we both receive the same reward of heaven (though perhaps in my heart, I feel I deserve it more). However, when many of us read this now, we read with new eyes—a perspective more in line with the argument itself. Human beings struggling to survive and with a feeling of “I am owed more than another person because I have been here longer” is anything but a foreign concept to most of us. This basic instinct of “it’s mine because I was here first” is certainly not alien to our culture. It is often the basis on which many will prioritize resources: First come, first serve.

The key to this story lies within the attitude of the owner of the field. The explanation the owner gives to those complaining was a simple one: “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” This would soon become Jesus’ mantra for so many of his teachings: The last will be first, and the first will be last. And the teaching had a real here-and-now context—not necessarily an only-in-heaven context. This saying seemed to typically be used when economics were at play, when money was on the line. Another prominent place it is used is when the rich young ruler comes to Jesus and wants to know what he can do to get into heaven, and when Jesus told him to give all of his wealth to the poor, he left sad because he just couldn’t do it. “The last will be first and the first will be last” was Jesus’ summation of things.

Jesus turned the notion of “first come, first serve” and instead offered a different perspective. The ones owed more are the ones most in need. When the owner of the field paid the workers the same, even those who worked less, another way of looking at it is that he paid them what they needed. John Ruskin wrote a set of essays in 1860 that highlighted the idea of a “living wage.” And he used Jesus’ parable as an example of an employer paying all the employees a “living wage” across the board not because they all worked equally as hard or for the exact same amount of hours, but because they all needed that amount simply to survive.

From the scripture itself we can understand Jesus’ parable to teach us something of love. If we envision ourselves as the workers who started at beginning of the day—we’d have to admit we were quite lucky (or privileged) to get work at all, and here we are gainfully employed. Our children will eat tonight. Then two others join much later; they have family to provide for too—human beings with the same worth. And instead of trying to cut their wages down based solely on our feelings of entitlement, shouldn’t we rejoice and be grateful to the employer for being gracious to them? Because of the employer’s generosity, their children will eat tonight too. If we had been generous in our hearts, then if the employer had been ungenerous, maybe we would have even given up part of our wages to at least allow us all to feed our children something, if not but a little. However, often times our attitudes in the name of “fairness” are to cut wages from those who we feel don’t work as hard or have arrived to the jobsite too late, those we deemed unworthy for one reason or another.

And this is the state of things in our community. Many of us have benefited from opportunities given to us by birth. Others of us have had to work gain these benefits later in life and others of us will never quite achieve the same level of opportunity period, but we all have the same basic human needs. All of our children cry with hunger at the end of the day. Those of us who arrived to the field at the beginning of the day (or even earlier in the day than others), we must be as generous as the God we claim to serve—fully elevating the last to be first!

Shalom