

Year A Proper 24 Last to the Party? Matthew 20 vv1 to 16

“So the first will be last, and the last will be first.” This is a short little quip that seems to sum up the whole parable of these workers in the vineyard. Taking it that way, though, can lead to a multitude of interpretations that may or may not be accurate since each of us would hear these words – the first will be last and the last will be first – according to our own ideas and life experience. Who are the first and the first in what? Who are the last and the last in what? Let’s take a deeper look into this story so that we gain an understanding of Jesus’ story that helps us operate in this world now as the church together.

The curtain opens to reveal a clearly wealthy landowner heading to the market place to secure some workers for the day – workers who will tend to his vineyard. These men hanging out in the market place – it was only men at that time – were in a precarious financial situation. They were day labourers in an economy that concentrated the land and, therefore, the wealth into a few hands. These men *had* to be in the market place each day – they had no other choice – it was the only way they would be able to feed themselves and their families.

Each week, we have been hearing the stories from the great saga of the Exodus from Egypt. These are pivotal stories, not only in the lives of Jewish people, but in our lives too. They reveal God’s plan for us – the plan for salvation – ours and the world’s. Remember, salvation means rescue and being made whole. God’s plan to achieve this is to rescue us from empire – the political and economic systems and institutions that lead to the uneven distribution of resources, that lead to the brokenness of God’s creation. God brings us out of empire into life in a counter-cultural community – a community that shares with and cares for all others. The new reality this life forms in us is, and always has been, God’s plan. We see it in

the story of the Exodus and we see it in the story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. He died to rescue us from empire and yet, here we are, having fallen hook, line, and sinker once more for the seductive ways of an economy that promises happiness through wealth but more often leads to despair, worry, hunger, oppression, crime...

Just like the men in the market place, our society has a vulnerable class of people reliant on the wealth of others. Perhaps immediately coming to mind are the homeless, the poor needing social assistance from our governments but our society has vulnerable at every level. Those with less rely on those with more. Tourism depends on this. Labourers in every job rely on this. The service and leisure industries rely on this. We have the same concentration of wealth and power to the few that Jesus was addressing in his story of the labourers in the vineyard. At 9:43am, on the first working day of 2023, Canada's richest CEO's had already earned the average worker's salary for the entire year.

We see today that this is not God's plan. Life in God's kingdom is not the constant struggle to make ends meet, to acquire stuff that we want but don't need in order to supposedly make our lives happier, in order to feel fulfilled. At each end of the wealth spectrum and at every step in between, we find the rampant individualism and consumerism that tries to hammer into us that life is about us and our needs, about our personal happiness and satisfaction and that of our families.

The landowner in our story, meant to represent God – who is the ultimate landowner – in scene after scene, goes into the market place to rescue more and more of the vulnerable workers, to share his abundance with them, to give them life. We have trouble with this story when the final scene unfolds. The landowner

gives to the latecomers the exact same pay as the labourers who worked all day. To our modern ears, this does not seem fair. One group worked a whole lot more than the others and yet everyone received the exact same payment from the landowner. Believe me, this also sounded completely unfair to Jesus' listeners 2000 years ago. This was not the way the system worked. Work is viewed as a transaction between master and worker – a transaction of benefit to both. Yes, you are paying me but I'm getting your work done for you. This is how we think and so we are offended when the story does not unfold according to our sense of just and fair. What is Jesus' point?

We likely sympathize with the workers who spent all day in the hot sun yet got the same pay as those who worked just an hour or so. We may even *feel* like those first labourers coming in last...working hard and seeing rewards go to others who seem to be barely working at all. This may even be the case in our work with God – labouring tirelessly, giving money, buying gifts, handing out food, donating clothes, lending a helping hand wherever we see the need and, for our efforts, we feel tired and worn out and we wonder if we are making a difference at all. This thinking, though, is falling prey to the way the world thinks. The world tells us that if we work hard enough, we'll get ahead and we'll have money and possessions enough to make us happy but, since we live in a world still broken, this thinking often does not work. The game of life, when played according to the rules of the world, is absolutely not fair. We cannot place ourselves in the role of the labourers who worked all day, seeing work as a mutually beneficial transaction, because taking that role only leaves us with feelings of hopelessness and bitterness.

As I've said before, when Jesus tells a parable, he is covering a stick of dynamite with a story. Where is the surprisingly explosive bit of *this* story? We will miss it if we try to make the story about us. The story is first about God and God's kingdom and then how we fit our lives into that story. This story tells us that God is abundantly generous – God is creator and ruler of all things. All that we are and all that we have, comes from the abundant generosity of God because God loves all that he created. Realizing this leads us to the explosive bit – that we are, every one of us, the labourer who comes late to the vineyard, the guest late to the party but receives an undeserved gift from the landowner. While we were yet sinners, Paul tells us, when we did not deserve the amazing gift of being included in God's purpose, Jesus died for us and gave us that gift anyway. We've had the kingdom of God opened to us in all of our human imperfection.

We humans, though, have a hard time looking past ourselves to see and understand what Jesus is telling us about God and God's ways. We love to compare ourselves to others – what we look like, what we do, what we have...Clever advertising encourages us to do this. Society encourages us to do this. The first workers grumble at the supposed unfairness of the situation and we grumble along with them. With a shock, we realize that we are grumbling because of the generosity of the landowner. We are jealous because people who worked less than us received the same reward from a kind and compassionate master. With a twinge of guilt and very grudgingly, we admit that we were fairly paid – we received what the master told us we were going to receive.

“Jesus condemns the complaints of those who do not accept God's goodness. There is no room in the kingdom for the pursuit of a higher salary” (p.197-8 of

Days of the Lord). All that we have is from God's loving generosity not from our own merits. Through love, we are given a share of God's goods. Our labour in God's vineyard must be seen in the light of God's love for us – "not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences." It is then that we will be able to rejoice in God's generous love for others along with us. If we cannot do this, we risk our own reward. The first will be last. If we labour hard but cannot put aside bitterness when we do not receive what we think we deserve for our efforts, if we cannot put aside the envy of others, of other churches, with more, we will be last. This is really tough to do though. I've said this so many times you could say it for me: Measuring success and failure according to the world's ways is drilled into us – property, position, pocketbook, pounds on the scale, people in the pews – these are our measuring sticks, these we use to compare ourselves to others, these cause bitterness and envy and despair.

Our God is not a god of despair but the God of hope. "The last will be first." As tough as it is to ignore the clanging gong of society's voice, it is necessary. We strive to hear the still small of God, calling us to him in love and for love. We are imperfect humans but, together, we are the Church – the divine body of Christ – consciously reminding ourselves that we are the labourers late to the party, undeserving of the generous gift of the master but overjoyed and rejoicing that it is ours. We are the Church – the divine body of Christ – called by God to labour alongside God and one another, the last of the labourers to be hired, not setting a wage for our work but trusting in the kindness and generosity of the One who hires us, trusting that in our work and in our worship we are being transformed, the world is being transformed. As we daily struggle to think and be and see the

world as God does, we become more and more for the world the sign of God's kingdom, the foretaste of God's kingdom, and the instrument to hasten God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

“Faced with God's boundless love for the world, especially when it is lavished upon others, we reveal whether we view our own labour as a gift from God or as benefit to God, [whether we hold the expectation of fair payment earned or the pleasure of undeserved generous bounty, viewing our work] as the joyful fulfillment of our created purpose or as the mere endurance of scorching heat” (Ira Brent Driggers, workingpreacher.org). There always lies before us two paths – one of despair, bitterness, and death without God; the other of hope, joy, and life with God. The choice of path is daily ours to make. The first will be last. The last will be first.