

"The Eleventh Hour"
Matthew 20:1-16
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
9/7/08
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Scene 1 The landowner goes out early in the morning, and four more times to contract laborers for his vineyard

This parable is found only in Matthew, and seems a little hard to get into. So let us bring it into modern times.

Imagine the scene of a tropical third world country, maybe even in Sayaxche, Guatemala. The sun rises at 6AM and sets at 6PM. You and your family live in a thatch roof, dirt floor hut, on the outskirts of town, and walk in the dark into that dirty, garbage strewn town at almost 5 o'clock in the morning looking for work. It is the middle of the summer, so even at 5AM, the streets have not yet cooled off from the previous day, and with all the garbage, smell pretty bad. A truck drives through town, the driver calling out "**Work**, work, work work! **Work**, work, work, work!" You ask him how much he is going to pay you, if you work all day for him. He tells you, 5 Quetzales. The equivalent of one dollar. You figure this will buy your family of four enough beans and rice for one day. It is not enough to save for that tin roof your spouse wants you to buy some day, but it will keep your family fed for another day. So you accept his pay, and hop on the back of the chicken truck. After the truck is full to standing room only, you ride the truck into the field many miles away to plant African palm oil trees. The truck drops you off as the sun rises, and heads back into town to pick up more workers.

Let us move several thousand miles north to Brentwood on the same day. I drove an expensive hybrid car to church today. I live in an expensive house in Brentmeade. I sent my children to private schools. But I live in a bubble. All of us here in Williamson and Davidson counties live in a bubble. Instead of calling scenes like what I have described in Guatemala the third world, we could describe them as the two thirds world. Or even more accurately, the four fifths world!

But what would Jesus say about the bubble we live in? Where I drive a nice car, live in a nice house, and send my children to private schools, while others earn one dollar or less per day in wages, for working harder than I ever worked. This parable addresses the question, "What would Jesus say?"

Scene 2 The landowner pays everyone the same, and those hired first are envious

The field manager makes many runs to pick up workers all day, right up until just before quitting time. You arrived in the field at 6 AM, but workers are still being dropped off at 5PM, an hour before quitting time. The late arrivers miss the heat of the day, and you consider them fortunate. And at 6PM, the manager pays all of the full day workers and one hour workers the same, 5 Quetzales! Just enough to pay for the food for a family of

four for one day. You agreed that is a fair wage, but you worked 12 hours and some of your fellow workers only worked one hour! How fair is that! Matthew says Jesus called the full day workers envious. But what is translated into English as envious is better translated, more literally, as casting an “evil eye.”

Sometimes you and I cast “evil eyes” don’t we? We are jealous of someone who does not work as hard and receives the same or more benefits than us. I have a tendency to justify my nice car, nice house, and nice education by saying I work harder than anyone else. But is that really true? And is that really God’s justice?

Is the landowner really fair? Don’t the folks who work all day have a legitimate beef? We second guess a God who breaches the system and equalizes the pay like this. Perhaps the justice of the work-a-day world of our culture does not describe God’s justice. Perhaps divine justice does not rest on the merit system. Perhaps the landowner’s actions call for a totally different way of viewing God.

But this parable does offend our sense of justice!

Scene 3 The landowner wants everyone to eat

We read in today’s lesson that when the manager asks why folks were standing around at 5 PM, they said, “Because no one hired us.” Does that sound a little like, “Because no one wanted us?” Or, “Because no one loved us?” There is no more cherished word in the Christian’s vocabulary than the word, “grace.” Simply put, the word “grace” describes the mercy, love, and forgiveness of God to an undeserving people. Is it surprising polls show “Amazing Grace” is the favorite hymn of American church goers? But the notion of grace loses its cutting edge. Its meaning becomes divorced from the character of a just God, and degenerates into saccharine permissiveness. So this parable jolts our sentimentality. Because the landowner claims the right to pay his workers on the basis not of their merits, but on the basis of his own compassion. Would he want the one hour workers to not have enough food? Why should generosity be condemned as injustice? Maybe divine compassion outshines the justice of our work-a-day world. Outshines the justice of our secular world. This parable might even be a response to those who criticized Jesus for associating with tax collectors and sinners.

This shocking parable is not really a new story, is it? The grumbling of the full day workers reminds us of Jonah sitting on a hill outside Ninevah and pouting when God spares that evil city. The grumbling of the full day workers reminds us of the pouting older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, when his father invited him into the celebration of the prodigal’s return. The grumbling of the full day workers reminds us of the Pharisee in prayer, who thanks God he is not like that sinner over there.

But Jesus subordinates rewards to grace. We may ourselves be full day workers, but what we have accomplished is far outstripped by the work God did in Jesus 2000 years ago. In this sense, we are all 11th hour workers. None of us deserves the glory God has prepared for us.

Conclusion

In the reign of God, God's mercy is often surprising, even offensive. We are valued not because of our economic productiveness, or our sinlessness, but because God loves us. That which *appears* to be an outrageous injustice is the greatest justice of all – justice motivated not by merit but by mercy and love. Divine *grace* is a great *equalizer* which rips away *presumed* privilege and puts *all* recipients in the same boat. That is a bitter pill for us to swallow, when we have burdened ourselves with a merit system, and want to see reward for our labor. That is a bitter pill for us to swallow, when we discover those guilty of wrongs we oppose, are in fact brothers and sisters to whom God is equally generous. In today's parable, grace no longer seems sentimental. But again, we remember what we have accomplished is nothing compared to what God accomplished in Jesus 2000 years ago, and accomplishes even today.

Imagine you yourself are standing in the dirty, smelly streets of Sayaxche at 5 o'clock in the morning. And that chicken truck drives by. But sitting in the cab is not the landowner, but the creator and owner of the entire universe, God in Jesus. God trolls the streets with his chicken truck, calling out, "*Love*, love, love, love! *Love*, love, love, love!" God is handing out unconditional love to anyone who wants it. But everyone gets the same amount. So you have a decision to make. Are you going to get on God's chicken truck now, or at the 11th hour?

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...