

Sunday – September 18, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon –**Laborers**

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Script: Matthew 20:1-16

Parables, by definition, are brief stories that use earthly examples to reveal a heavenly truth. Jesus very graciously did not try to describe what heaven is actually like. He is not describing a place or even a state of being. Jesus uses common, every-day situations to give his listeners a sense of the nature of the kingdom of heaven. And when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he is not focusing on pie in the sky when we die bye and bye. Never forget that Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is within us and among us right now. We shall more fully experience it when we die and go there. But, we can feel it, be a part of it, and share it here and now.

So, the every-day situation Jesus uses in this parable is the almost-universal unemployment and poverty of his homeland at that time. The working poor, who had homes and worked their own land, had been taxed so heavily by the Roman Empire and their own Jerusalem Temple, that most of them had lost their homes and land, and were reduced to working for the very few wealthy people who owned everything. Farmers, fishermen, shepherds all worked for rich Romans or rich scribes, elders, Pharisees or Sadducees who were the ruling class. Very, very few of the people who were listening to Jesus were anything else but very, very poor. It is easy to see why the kingdom of heaven Jesus offered appealed to them more than the Roman Empire and Jerusalem Temple that had done nothing but crush them.

Because Jesus offered this alternative to the ruling Romans and Temple leaders, the message of Jesus is very political. The Romans didn't crucify Jesus because he was too nice. They crucified him because he preached an alternative to their *Pax Romana*, an alternative that said that the needs of *every* human being are holy, that God loved the people that the rulers had been oppressing, that love is more powerful than an occupying army.

So, let's look at this parable. The unemployed men are all gathered at the marketplace, hoping someone would come along and employ them for the day. For a day's work, they would earn a denarius. While that was the accepted day's wage, it was not a living wage. A man taking a denarius home at the end of the day could not feed a family very well at all.

It would have been like a family today, trying to house, clothe and feed a couple of children on one minimum wage job. Those jobs don't usually offer much in the way of medical insurance or pensions, and there usually isn't much left over at the end of the pay period for a savings account. Now, imagine that instead of 14.3% of families living in poverty, as the figures indicate is currently the case in the US, that the figure in first century Palestine would be closer to 95%, probably higher. And, while a denarius per day wouldn't lift them out of poverty, it would be much better than nothing.

So, a landowner comes to the marketplace at dawn and takes some men to work in his vineyard. Then he goes back at 9am and gets some more, and at noon for more, and at 3pm for more and finally at 5pm ("the eleventh hour" in the King James Version) for everyone left in the marketplace.

All the men are glad to get work for the day. They are all planning on how to spend that denarius most efficiently to provide as much as possible for their hungry families. They line up to get their pay, beginning with the ones who had worked the least. And they got a denarius, which no doubt thrilled them.

It also thrilled the ones who had been working all day long. They were thinking that they might get 2 or 3 denarii for their day's work, even though they had agreed to work for "the usual daily wage" of one denarius. And when it was their turn, sure enough, they got one denarius, just like the men who had done almost no work, and certainly were not working at the hottest part of the day.

This enraged them. Why? Because it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that everyone got the same pay for various amounts of work. The landowner essentially said, "Shut up, take your money and go home." The explanation is that it's his money to do with whatever he wants, and that they had agreed for what they'd been paid. So, "Shut up, take your money and go home." He's the boss. He makes the rules.

Often, this parable is interpreted with God being the landowner, who offers the same gift of salvation to all the people he calls into his vineyard. The people who had been working all day might be the Christians who had been Christian all their lives. The ones who came in late might be the Christians who converted late in life. And they get the same salvation as the life-long Christians. Heaven is heaven. And, that's what you get. Period.

But, what if that's not it? What if that's not what the kingdom of heaven is like? Because the world in which the rich write the rules and the poor take whatever they can get sounds like *this* world, not like the next world. Would Jesus really compare salvation to a wage that was not even a living wage?

What if the parable is a picture of what their world was like, and "the kingdom of heaven" is where "the last will be first and the first will be last"?

Look at the parable. The last are not "first" except that they were first in line to get paid the same thing everyone else got paid. And the first aren't last, except in that same line. I think if we sit with this for a few minutes, we can see that the parable does not match up with the moral.

Doesn't it seem more realistic to look at the whole vineyard/marketplace scenario as being descriptive of the world of Jesus' listeners? Other than the rich guy paying *everyone* the daily wage, regardless of how long they worked, it's just another day living under the boot of Roman/Temple oppression for Judean peasants.

But, the last being first and the first being last - now that's something new, something out of the ordinary. Think back to the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. He blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for their faith in Jesus.

Those people who are ignored or rejected or reviled by the rich and powerful are the ones Jesus blesses. That is the last being first. Jesus himself was a convicted criminal, tortured and crucified and buried in a borrowed tomb. That's about as last as you can get. But, the Resurrection proved that the last would be first. And the first? Pilate is a footnote to Jesus' story, otherwise lost to history. Same for the Temple bureaucrats, except they *are* completely forgotten. The first are definitely last.

So, the people who follow Jesus will try as hard as they can to love their neighbors, even the ones society would consider the least, the last and the lost. Jesus identified with them, and we should treat them just the way we'd treat Jesus. The last should be the first in our hearts, just as they are in Christ's heart. Jesus loves, and Christians should also love the first - the rich,

the powerful, the oppressor. But, the kind of ministry they need is very different from the ministry Christ offers to the poor, the sick and the lonely. Let's be praying for guidance as to how we might minister to *all* God's children, as we try to hear God's call into ministry wherever God sends us and with whomever God sends to us.