

“Last & First; First & Last”

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Someone came to see Jesus and asked how they could have eternal life. The person went away sad because Jesus' answer was a hard one. “Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.” This person had lots of stuff and went away sad.

The disciples closest to Jesus were listening and were probably a little shocked. Look, we've left everything to follow you!” Jesus tells them it will all work out. Then he tells them a story.

“God's kin-dom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. They agreed to the usual daily wage, went to work.

“Later, about nine o'clock, he saw others standing around in town. He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I'll pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o'clock. Around five o'clock he went out and found others standing around. He said, ‘Why are you standing here all day doing nothing?’

‘Because no one hired us,’ they replied.

He told them to go to work in his vineyard.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their pay. Start with the last ones hired and go on to the first.’

Those hired at five o'clock came up and were each given the usual daily wage. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But each of them also received the usual daily wage.

When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ‘These last workers put in only one hour, and you just made them equal to us even though we worked all day in the hot sun.’

But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. We agreed on the usual daily wage. So take it and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?’

We often assume that the householder represents God when we hear this story. God's vineyard suggests that this is a story about salvation. We might also hear the story pitting the first-hired against the latecomers. Those who sweated in the sun all day behave rather like the Prodigal son's older brother. “But that's not fair!”

What happens if we change the focus? When we look at the gospel record, we find that Jesus was much more concerned with how we love our neighbor than in how we get into heaven. Could this parable be about real workers in a real marketplace with a real landowner? When we look at Jesus' words this way, the story is not about salvation in some distant future but about salvation in the here and now.

Maybe Jesus is drawing us a picture of what God would have us do – not to earn salvation – but to love our neighbor. Jesus responds to that person who asked, “What do I need to do to have eternal life,” by asking “Will the children be able to eat dinner tonight?”

Looking at the householder, one scholar suggests that we start off assuming that this person is simply an employer in search of workers. He *may* be representing God but that's yet to be determined. We need to listen to the story deeply to decide.

The householder offers his first workers the going rate. It's a fair payment. At 9, he goes back to the marketplace and notices others without work. This suggests that rather than being lazy, they simply hadn't been hired by anyone yet. He says he will give them what's right. And we have no reason not to trust him.

The householder goes out again at noon and then again at 3:00. Didn't he know how many workers he needed? Were there just not enough workers initially that he had to keep going back? Or does he have another agenda?

Maybe these later workers had been waiting since dawn but were not chosen. Maybe they'd arrived late. Perhaps they'd already worked another job and were hoping for a little more income. Maybe they were sandwich generation people, taking care of children at home or aging parent. The point is we don't know. And we shouldn't assume things that the text – or other biblical texts – gives us no reason to suppose.

When the householder comes to the market at 5, he asks, "Why are you still here?" maybe in surprise as in "I would have brought you on sooner if I'd realized." Their response, "No one hired us," supports this idea.

This is important. All of the workers are part of the same labor pool; they're all found at the same place; they all go to work in the same vineyard. The last folks weren't outcasts or feeble or in any way less desirable. They were just like the first ones hired.

Now the workday's over. And we still don't know if the householder represents God. How about if this character not only stands in for God but also stands in for how everyone who claims to follow God should act?

Some people have suggested that the way the workers are paid sets up an "us vs. them" dichotomy. That Jesus was setting the Jewish followers of the Law against the Jewish people who were open to his idea about God's welcome and acceptance of everyone. But while we fully support and affirm that God's grace is for everyone, this idea that Jesus pits certain of his people against others forgets that Jesus is a Jewish rabbi talking to a Jewish audience.

Other people say that the householder in this parable is exploiting his workers. He treats his employees arbitrarily and unjustly. Feminists have sometimes been reminded of a history of women taking low paying jobs only to have men show up later and receive the same money for less work. In pitting the coworkers against each other, some say the householder is engaged in 1st century union busting.

Or perhaps it's none of these things!

As we insert ourselves into this story we find that the workers and the householder are operating from very different standards. The workers are looking at what's "fair." And from their perspective, paying everyone the same isn't fair.

But the householder is concerned not with what is "fair" but what is "right." In telling this parable, Jesus is teaching his listeners to focus on what is "right."

Of course, some people – like Sally in the famous Charlie Brown Christmas story – want what’s coming to them. They want what they believe is their fair share. To that, the employer says he has given them exactly what he’d promised. Yes, they’re disgruntled, but maybe this is less about not getting what they deserve and more about not wanting the last hired to receive a living wage. The landowner is having none of it. They should be happy that he’s generous enough to ensure that everyone can take care of their families.

Okay, last week I reminded us that Jesus’ parables are about turning the way things usually are on their ear. These stories take the everyday and invert them to show what God’s kin-dom on earth is supposed to look like – when we follow God’s lead.

Jesus wasn’t the first one to say these things, or to practice them. King David, in the OT, insisted that the same share of the spoils of battle be given to the one watching the supplies as to the ones who fought (1 Samuel 30:21-5).

Yet this is another example of Jesus at his most practical. The householder does represent God but also serves as a model for all of us. Jesus encourages those who have enough to practice this kind of graciousness – to keep recruiting more people to the work in the field and to do “what is right” by making sure every person receives a living wage that allows them to feed their families while keeping their dignity intact. If some of the people really can’t work as hard as the others, still, give to each one not according to their ability but according to their need.

In this way, we learn that the point is not that those who have “get more” but that those who have not “get enough.” Radical! But then that’s a word that some of us regularly associate with Jesus.

This Jesus is neither Democrat, Republican, nor Green. This Jesus lays out our responsibility as he honors the words of Deuteronomy: “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land” (15:11). In the end, all have enough to eat. The rich accept their responsibility to those who are less well off. The early workers accept that *everyone* has worth in God’s kin-dom.

Thank heaven this isn’t just another story about how to get into heaven. It’s about who gets to eat and creating heaven on earth. And it’s directed at everyone – to those with excess wealth as well as those struggling to make ends meet. To all of us, Jesus points to what it means to act as God acts, practicing generosity on everyone.

That’s more like the kind of parable we can expect from this skilled 1st century storyteller – with his eyes on us and his stories pointing to God.

Amen.

This sermon is adapted from Amy-Jill Levine’s *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, chapter 7, 2015.