

Eleventh-Hour Workers

Matthew 20: 1-16

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It just doesn't seem fair, does it?

We have on our hands a landowner who does not play by the rules. ¹ We have a landowner, a symbol for God, who is so generous that he seems reckless. The workers who show up for one hour get paid the same wages as those who work for twelve hours? It reminds us of a student who shows up only for the last day of class and receives an "A." It reminds us of a new employee who works for only one year and receives full retirement. It just doesn't seem fair. What kind of justice is this, we ask?

This parable is not meant to be a practical guide on how to run a vineyard or a business or a classroom. ² Instead, it is a story about grace. It is a story about workers who grumble about generosity and about grace, of all things.

When we translate this parable about workers in the vineyard of a generous landowner to an illustration about God and the kingdom of heaven, well...it still doesn't seem fair.

Does a person who accepts Christ on death row receive the full treasure of God—the same as those of you who have been faithful for sixty, seventy, eighty years? Do deathbed confessions erase a lifetime of corruption and greed? That doesn't seem fair, does it? If we are honest, we must admit that this parable is offensive to many of us. I've only been in this church for a brief time, but I know that you are diligent people. You serve on church committees, you help with Vacation Bible School, you care about your community, you take food to families who grieve, you volunteer with the Boy Scouts or at the schools, you work hard, you are good to your families, you study hard, you pray. You put in long days being faithful.

I think that is why this story is offensive. Many of us best identify with the workers who have labored all day—or at least most of the day. Being a Christian is hard work, isn't it? We know that we are saved by grace; we know that in our heads. But should it be so easy for the one-hour workers?

You and I should be glad that the master is so generous. Yet the parable ends in grumbling, not in gladness. Why would we be upset that the master is so generous? ³

Our society is one of earners. We keep up with our hours worked, our tasks accomplished, our money invested. We spend a lot of time earning. We earn money, vacation time, grades, respect, even frequent flyer miles.

During my last semester in seminary, I took a fantastic class on health and spirituality. I admired my professors and I worked hard. On the last day of class, I learned that the grading system was pass/ fail; somehow I had missed that information at the beginning of the semester. I was horrified. I had worked for an "A." As I was leaving class that last day, I asked one of my professors, "If you were giving grades, besides just passing, what would you give me? An "A," right?" I was only half-joking. That's pretty sick, isn't it?

Our culture is obsessed with what we think we deserve. Not much has changed since Jesus' time.

In this text there is no hint that any of the late workers deliberately delayed their availability, that they presumed the employer would be generous.⁴ When the grapes were at their prime, the landowner would need extra workers in order to harvest quickly. Unemployed workers would make themselves available by waiting in the marketplace.

It is interesting that the latest workers did not bargain with the employer. The first group, however, made a firm and clear contract for a full day's wage. Before they would work, these seven o'clock workers negotiated their pay. The nine, noon, and three o'clock shifts were less specific, being promised only what was right. The five o'clock workers, the eleventh-hour workers, simply went.⁵

At the end of the day, all workers were given what they had been promised. The first workers got the full day's wage. They weren't lied to or cheated. The offense lies in the landowner's generosity to others.⁶ We sometimes have trouble celebrating the gifts that other people receive—especially if we see those people as lazy or mean or reckless or unappreciative. It is sometimes harder to rejoice with those who rejoice than to weep with those who weep. So, we grumble.

In the Presbyterian Church, we talk a lot about grace. But many of us have trouble celebrating the grace that other people receive. When I receive grace, I think I deserve it. When you receive grace, I grumble.⁷ No one sings, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that save a wretch like *you*." Maybe we worry that there just isn't enough grace to go around.

These workers who begin at five in the afternoon said they had no work because no one had offered them a job.

Imagine waking up early and going to the marketplace before seven o'clock, hoping for work, knowing that you need a full day's wage, knowing that someone in your family is counting on you to bring home a denarius. You aren't chosen at seven or again at nine. Maybe you are smaller, maybe you are older, maybe you are pregnant. Something about you makes you seem weaker or slower than the first groups. And then you aren't picked at noon or even at three in the afternoon.

And you still need a full day's wage.

Just imagine that you are the one who has waited in vain throughout the whole day, knowing that you are desperate and needy. You realize that you would stand idle and useless all day were it not for the benevolence of the landowner.⁸

Imagine the relief of being told to work at five. You don't ask what your earnings will be. You are desperate and trusting and glad that the day will not be entirely wasted. Even one-twelfth of the full day's wage will help. You can at least take that home to prove that you care for those who are counting on you.

And then imagine lining up to obtain your pay. Receiving a full day's wage instead of the one hour of pay that you expected. Imagine the *extravagance* of that act—A full day's wage!

Imagine how heavy it feels in your hand.⁹

Imagine how immense is your thankfulness—for a master who does not play by the rules, but whose generosity overflows. Imagine your gratefulness.

The truth is that we are all eleventh-hour workers. We are undeserving of even a morsel of grace, undeserving of even a glimpse of salvation. Yet we receive abounding grace and eternal life. All of us, eleventh-hour workers.

Notes

¹ William H. Willimon, “Grumbling About Grace,” *Pulpit Resource* 27, no. 3 (1999): 48.

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 224.

³ Willimon, 49.

⁴ Fred Craddock, John Hayes, Carl Holladay, and Gene Tucker, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year A* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 199.

⁵ Long, 225.

⁶ Craddock, 200.

⁷ Willimon, 49.

⁸ Long, 225.

⁹ I am indebted to the Rev. Joan Gray for her sermon, “Life in the Labor Pool,” preached at Columbia Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia, on September 29, 1996.