

Good and Plenty: Matthew 19:30-20:16

³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

²⁰“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

We moved to New Orleans post-Katrina. And even though it had been 4 years since the effects of that hurricane took its toll on that city, there was still a lot of rebuilding to do. There was not just a house here and a house there that were in need of total renovation, but there were whole streets, entire neighborhoods, that were abandoned and in need of rebuilding. Regardless of the time of day, if you drove by a Lowes or a Home Depot you could see a line of workers waiting for work. Occasionally you’d see a truck come by and select a group of the men for work that day. Roofers and construction companies often used these day laborers to get the job done at their construction sites.

It always bothered me to see those men standing outside, rain or sweltering heat, waiting not only for someone to stop, but for someone to pick them. I always felt bad for them. And since many of those men were Hispanic, I often wondered if it was the only job they felt they had a chance of getting.

That might sound racist, but that is their reality. I didn't only encounter gentlemen like this while driving through town. My comment isn't one coming solely from the outside looking in. It's coming from actually getting to talk with some of them. While we were in New Orleans, I worked at a church located on busy Canal Street. I was the person who answered the door to many people like these day laborers and assisted them getting with food. We were a small, poor, yet rapidly growing church with a prominent building in town. Not a day went by where we didn't have people come by asking for food. Because of our smaller budget, and our large community need, we couldn't pass out a box of food like our local Norwalk Food Pantry. But we could make sure they had enough to eat that day. And that's what we did. We gave them enough for a day. It's something good, because it's plenty.

Day laborers and most of those who work minimum wage jobs take life one day at a time. If they're given the opportunity to work, they work. They work without benefits or extra incentives. They work without a dignified title and often without even a bathroom break. They work trusting that they will get a fair days wage, all while not knowing what tomorrow may bring.

Our text for today tells a story of day laborers. It is a rather unusual story in that the landowner goes back and hires more laborers several times throughout the day. A typical shift was all daylight, 6am to 6pm. Yet this landowner hires at 6am, 9am, 12noon, 3pm, and 5pm. That's a lot of hiring for one day. And it's odd that the landowner continues hiring people throughout the day. But the oddness doesn't stop with the hiring. The landowner has the manager pay everyone the same days wage. Everyone, the 6am laborers and the 5pm laborers, all got the same days wage.

Now while these laborers were used to working with daily wages, they still understood this was completely unfair. We, on the other hand, are used to working with hourly wages, and we can do basic math, so we know how to break down the pay scale here. That hour laborer should have gotten $\frac{1}{12}^{\text{th}}$ what the day laborer received. And the day laborer called him out on it. He said it wasn't fair for the hour laborer to receive the same amount. Well, technically, he said it wasn't fair for the landowner to make the hour laborers equal to the day laborers. Equal. That's an interesting word. One that when discussing pay or jobs might bring lots of things to the forefront of your mind.

Our society has whole movements for equal pay for equal work. The Women's Movement was all about equal pay for equal work. Minorities have fought for years for equal pay for equal work. But what is equal? How does society decide who gets paid what? Pro athletes get paid more than physicians and teachers. Does that mean they're better? They aren't all treated as equals in our society. We ask athletes and actors for their autograph. Our teenagers hang posters of singers up in their rooms to idolize them. These are not people who are considered equal to our hour laborers who make minimum wage or our day laborers who work for a fair wage.

Our society is a competitive society. Just yesterday I sat in my living room and cheered on my hometown team in a game of football. Over 100,000 people filled the stands, who knows how many others tuned in like I did? And that wasn't the only game on! We love competition. And while we say we're team players and we root for our team or our country to win various competitions, we still single out our favorite players. We recognize and reward our MVP of each game. We finish the Olympics and we don't say, wow, that Team America... We say, wow, that Michael Phelps... Competition is a part of us. It's a part of our daily routine. We set out not simply to do something, but to do it well. And as it is in human nature, we expect someone to recognize us for what we've done.

The landowner said to the day laborers, didn't you agree to the usual daily wage? Then he asked a two-fold question, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" And I almost wish he had extended that last question, "Or are you envious because I am being generous to someone besides yourself?"

Generosity bothers some of us. Why does that person, or that school, or that group get that donation? Even though we are not the judge nor the giver, we have an opinion about it. Just as the day laborer had an opinion about the generosity shown to the hour laborers. Are we that selfish of a people that we can't be happy for others when they are receiving something good? These day laborers were receiving enough to feed themselves for one day. It's something good, because it's plenty, plenty for that day.

As we know these everyday parables of Jesus always have a spiritual meaning tagged to them. Were the Jews still not playing nice with the Gentiles from a few weeks back? I could see how the Jews could view themselves as the day laborers, those who have worked all day in the vineyard. And view the Gentiles as the hour laborers who have just become a part of the kingdom of God at the last hour. I

could see how offering both Jew and Gentile God's grace and gift of salvation could ruffle some feathers. But we aren't the giver, God is. And salvation cannot be earned. Grace can't be bought. And yet we feel like it's due us. We feel like we've earned our spot in heaven by committing to the life of this church. By living out each day in a thoughtful and humble way. We think it's something we can earn and buy into. But it's not.

Tomorrow there will be several of you participating in the Ministerial Golf Tournament here in Norwalk that will help fund the Norwalk Ministerial Association. While playing if you end up taking several more swings than you anticipated, you will be able to purchase Hole Graces for each hole. However many are needed. Purchase away. Each grace gives you a free swing. For some of you, I suspect you'll need a lot of grace. And when you purchase your Hole Grace, you will see typed on each ticket that faithful verse from Ephesians 2, "For it is by grace you have been saved..."

We laugh at that because it's funny. Those Hole Graces are one of the actual moneymakers for the Ministerial Association, which is a good cause so we join in the fun. But we also laugh because we know that we can't buy grace. We can't buy our salvation. And against all feelings of self-righteousness, we also know we can't earn our salvation. It's a gift, a generous gift. It's good because it's plenty, it's all we need.

I forgot to tell you something cool about a lot of the day laborers I encountered in New Orleans. They work with each other and share the rewards. They take care of each other. They know that some days they'll get work. Other days the others will get work. Each day they make sure they are all fed. It might not be the finest of foods, but it's good, it's plenty, it's all they need.

This is what we pray for. Give us this day, our daily bread. We pray for US, plural. We pray that we all get fed, that we all share in the reward. And each week we are fed. We're fed right here at this table where there is always an abundance of bread and overflowing cup. We haven't earned our spot at the table, it's not something we can buy, but we've been generously given a place, and fed the gift of salvation, which is good, because it's plenty, and it's all we need.

Let us come to the table this morning as we sing...

Go, this week, working with people, caring for people, and accepting whatever generosity comes your way or the way of others. Go in peace.