

Being Last 8-28-05

Perhaps the most intimidating time for a preacher is the familiarity of Scripture, which consequently develops a numbness of the heart. The old, old story has been around a long, long time. For many Christians, this so called good news is no longer news to them. I mean, it no longer sounds as good as it used to sound. Maybe that's why sermons are hard to hear for some people. Delivering the good news requires a discipline that can only come from the gospel message itself. The discipline of hearing the good news is to let the simplicity of the Scripture speak to our lives.

The well known parable of the laborers in the vineyard can seem a little more like swallowing cod liver oil. We know that whatever Jesus says and teaches is right, right? You know that whatever Jesus teaches is really good for you. But this truth does not make it go down any easier. Oh. It'll go down all right, but it's the first swallow that's the hardest!

In sort of the same vein as the well-known parable of the prodigal son, this parable of the laborers in the vineyard is really one of those deep biting stories of forgiveness so radical that it offends many. The story appears to reward those who have done the least and sends those who have borne the burden of the day to the end of the line!

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Matthew 20:8-16, NIV.

How typical and classic of Jesus to scramble the egg for us--all to challenge us. To shake the applecart of what we consider sacred in our own lives-- and in particular that the front of the line is the place to be. It's the understanding that says the way to win God's favor and attention is to be the best person, the hardest of workers in his vineyard. Now, if you let the simplicity of today's parable speak, you know where this will get you... nowhere!

Hear the message clearly: according to the story of the laborers in the vineyard, those who are at the end of the line will not only get paid as much as those who are at the front of the line, but will also be paid first. What's the new saying these days..? "Life is good!" Not for those who are at the front of the line. **It is just-not-fair!**

Frankly, this parable, in our world and in our culture and even in our church culture is confusing and difficult to grasp. It's worth struggling with how hard stories like this one fit. I mean, at what point in his life does Jesus tell this parable? Where is Jesus and what is he doing? To whom is Jesus even talking too? What has just happened and what happens next in this narrative?

Look at the conversation that Peter and Jesus have just before Jesus tells the parable. **Matt. 19: 27-30**
Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"
28 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

And then Jesus goes right in to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard!
That is what happens before the parable. Now what happens after the parable is that James and John's mom comes up to Jesus and makes a special request for her two sons. She asks for her boys to be at the front of the line in his coming Kingdom. And Jesus says, "You don't know what you are asking," **Matthew 20:22, NIV.**

"The Kingdom Jesus speaks of is not made of gold and jewels but out of wood and nails in the shape of a cross."

It does help us to know where this parable fits in as we identify both before and after Jesus tells his disciples--who BTW are pushing to the front of the line for the best possible position, so that when the doors fly open and the show begins they can get the best seats in the house.

Have you ever pushed for the front of the line?

When I was a kid, I loved to go to the local roller-skating rink. Most of the time it was in the summer. We would get in line and there were always lots of people there. We were always so anxious to get in. You could see the workers through the little door window getting things ready to swing the doors open for the afternoon. But we had to wait... our money burning holes in our pockets as we thought about graveyard sodas and candy and pizza slices! It seemed to happen a lot that a friend would come a little late, but we'd save a spot for them in the line. This of course was always a touchy thing when others saw us give cuts to our friends. Of course, we didn't take to kindly to seeing others cut the line with their friends... especially if they were in front us.

The place we always wanted to be was at the front of the line. **There's just something about being at the front of the line on a hot summers day when the manager first opens the door and you feel that cool air before it moves that... you know... that roller-skating smell that seems to smell better when you're at the front of a hot sweaty line.** It's the smell that promises that fun is waiting for you inside.

I can't imagine for even a moment how disappointing and scaring it would be if the manager opened the doors and went to the end of the line and said, today we start here. Imagine those who just arrived, those who were not even sweating from standing in the hot sun! If I were the first kid in the line, I probably would have cried or at the least, booed because it would not have been fair. Those of us at the front of the line earned our reward (roller-skating smells and the privilege of being first).

On what grounds would anyone ever dare to reverse the order of the last going first and the first going last? (Especially in New England!)

In today's parable this is exactly what the landowner does. He dares to reverse the order. The landowner feels like being generous. This land is his land, and he can do whatever he wants with his land and his wealth. And on this day, this landowner wants the last to be first and the first to be last. No need to worry-- everyone will be paid. No one is going home empty handed. All this landowner

wants to do is reverse the order and pay everyone the same amount no matter how long or hard they worked in the sun.

Granted, some of these workers were there working from the first hour of the day. The landowner went out early in the morning looking to hire men to work in his vineyard. He offers them a day's wage of one denarius and they agree to work. By 9:00am the landowner decides that he needs more workers for the day's crop and goes to the corner to hire more men, and does so again at 12pm and 3pm. promising each time to pay them what is right.

Now in the last hour of the day, at 5pm the landowner goes out one more time to hire more workers and finds a few men who have not worked at all this day. He hires them to help finish off the day's work.

Then comes the moment they have all been waiting for. The heat of the long day's sun sets and the cool breeze stirs the smell of dusk, and the landowner calls his foreman and tells him to give them all their pay.

So beginning with the last ones first, he openly gives them one denarius. I can see and hear the excitement on the faces of those who worked for only one hour as they received their pay. The commotion stirs up the line a little and murmurs go through the crowd. You can hear what they are saying and thinking... the landowner has turned out to be a generous man. I mean if he has paid the latecomers a denarius for one hour of work, then those who have worked since dawn are going to have a rewarding day!

But before they can even begin to figure out what they might be paid, the foreman presses one denarius in their hands. It didn't matter if it was the latecomers or the first ones who arrived in the morning and slaved all day long in the hot sun bearing the load of work-- they all get paid one denarius. And you can hear the murmurs from the front of the line quickly turn into bitter grumbling. **"These men who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."** Their sunburned faces and sweaty clothes proved the difference between them.

That's when the landowner reminds them that he has not slighted them one bit. He has held his end of the bargain. He has paid them exactly what they agreed to be paid. **"Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"**

So... are they envious? You bet they are!

And like most people they have this innate sense of what is fair.

- Hey, equal pay for equal work is fair!
- Equal pay for unequal work is not fair!
- Listen, rewarding those who do the most work is fair.
- Rewarding those who do the least work is not fair!
- Treating everyone the same is fair!
- But treating everyone the same when they're not the same is not fair!

For those of us who have been around awhile, we know that life is not fair.

We've heard the stories and many times even lived the stories.

*...The employee who's always on time, never calls in sick but has to cover for that other employee who thinks the world revolves around her schedule and her life. She comes in late and calls in sick often. The first employee though is always willing to help out. She even stays late to help out her supervisor, who BTW knows that she is really the only one in the department that really knows what's going on. When the annual raises come the boss tells the first that she has an outstanding performance record. However, she's told there will be no merit raises this year, instead there's going to be a flat rate raise for all the employees and everyone will receive the same amount of money hoping this will improve the morale of the people. **It's not fair!***

*...The man who cares for his elderly mother... He takes her into his home and cares and provides for her. Although he has four brothers and sisters, it's rare to even get a phone call from them. And the few times they do call they tell him how grateful they are, but not one of them lifts a finger to help out. Their lives are busy and too hectic. And then his mother dies. Suddenly the entire family shows up grieving as if they had been there all along. After the funeral they congregated at the lawyer's office and are all ears. The son who has spent much of his life's savings to provide and care for his mother sits and listens with disappointment written all over his face as the will is read. "I leave my estates to be divided equally among my four dear children." it reads, "Because I love them all the same." **It's just not fair!***

Life is not fair! And it seems that as much as we know this it is very important for us that God be fair. -God should be the one authority that you can count on to reward people according to their work and efforts.

-God should be the one authority who keeps track of how long and how hard you've worked and who prevents people from cutting the line ahead of you.

-God should be the one manager who polices the line, who walks up and down the line and makes sure that everyone stays where he or she belongs.

-God should be the one who makes sure that the first remain first in line and the last patiently wait their turn at the end of the line. **Life may not be fair, but God should be!**

However, according to today's parable, God is the landowner who puts the same amount of money in each man's hand beginning at the end of the line first, where those who arrived last and worked the least. God is the landowner who moves from that end of the line to the front, where those who arrived first and worked the most are standing. Across this entire line the thoughts and reactions are quite different.

At the end of the line there is a lot of smiles and laughter and cheering, but as the foreman moves through the line the grumbling intensifies and becomes rather ugly. Every hand in the line receives this fair pay for a day's work. How one receives it depends entirely on what each man believes he deserves. Those who received more than they thought they deserved were celebrating. Those who received less were furious.

So God says: **Take your pay and go...Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?**

The most challenging thing for me in this parable is where 99% of us place ourselves in the line. To read the parable from the end of the line sounds a lot different from the front row seat. We understand front row seats... We relate well to being first... We understand fair! We know what it's like to get the short end of the stick. We are the ones who have been cheated. We know what it's like to get up early and work all day... for what? For some crazy landowner to come along and start at the wrong end of the line treating us just like those people who don't even get dressed until noon!

This is how most of us hear this parable. But it's possible that we are mistaken about our place in the line. Did you ever think about that? It is possible that as far as God's concerned we're really half way around the block at the end of the line. It's possible that there are a lot more people ahead of us in this line who are far more deserving of God's love than we are. People who will have more stars on their foreheads than we'll ever hope to have.

These are the people at the front of the line, and we are the people closer to the end of the line for all kinds of reasons. But no one ever told us about a line. In fact we didn't even know there was a line until late in the day. Even if we knew there was a line we might not have done much about it anyway. Many of us know that there are a lot of things we don't do much about. I mean there are a lot of things we mean to do, but for all sorts of reasons we don't and there are a lot of things we mean not to do that we do anyway. Even when we manage from time to time to do our best, life just seems to get in the way: People get sick, businesses fail, jobs go away, relationships fall apart. There are a lot of reasons why people end up at the end of the line. I guess only God can sort them all out.

Imagine for just a moment that it is you at the end of the line. That's you straining your neck just for a glimpse of the roller-skating rink, knowing that you'll never get in. Knowing that all the tickets will be gone long before you even get there. Imagine for a moment that although you're in the line you know that you're going to have one more hot afternoon on your hands while everyone else is laughing and eating pizza inside that dark, cool, smelly roller-skating rink. It'll make you want to cry. It'll make you want to give up. But all of a sudden there's a commotion in the crowd. The manager steps out of nowhere and walks right up to you, a stack of blue tickets in his hand. He says, "we're starting at the end of the line today" as he hands you one of those tickets. All of a sudden everyone at the end of the line begins to cheer!

God is not fair! And for reasons that we may never know, God seems to love us without discrimination. God also seems to enjoy reversing the systems and formats we set up to explain why God should love us more than others of us. When God starts at the ends of our lines, with the last and the least, God is showing us that his ways are not our ways and that if we want to see things his way we might question our own idea of what is fair and why we get so upset when our lines don't seem to work.

God is not fair, but depending on where you are in the line this can sound like some pretty good news! Because if God is not fair when there's a chance we will get paid more than what we're worth, and get more than what we deserve, and that we will make it through the doors even though we are last in line-- sounds like good news! This is not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

God is not fair! God is generous, and when we envy God's generosity it's because we've forgotten the place we are standing in the line. **You see, on any given day in our lives, when the sun goes down, and the cool breeze stirs the smell of dusk,** when the work is done and the foreman walks to the end of the line to hand out pay, there is a very good chance that the cheers and laughter and joy and the gratitude with which he is greeted will turn out to be our own. Amen!

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