

First & Last II/II: Matthew 20:1-16 “Workers”

Introduction:

Well! Friends!

We're looking at a parable today that I really, really like. It sort of, gently, smacks me in the face, you know? Gets my attention.

Jesus repeats himself this week, more or less. We're in the second of two scenes that end with him noting a great reversal of fortune that happens between this life and the life to come, between the operating values of the world as it is, and the Kingdom of Heaven.

We'll talk about this parable. Let's pray first.

Prayer:

Reading Again:

Let me read the parable again. I want it fresh in our minds.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

3 “About nine in the morning he went out and

saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. 6 About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'"

7 "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

8 "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.'

9 "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 'These 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.'

13 "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

General Things: Vineyards

Before we talk about today's passage, let me remind us of a couple of things that we see in these parables Jesus tells now and then. One of the, of course, are all sorts of agricultural metaphors. This just makes sense; in an agricultural society, a farming culture, the stories that everyone gets are farming stories. They immediately connect. For Jesus' first hearers, there's less to decode than for us, because they get farming the same way we get schooling, car-culture, typical suburban home chores. Dog poop pick up, anybody? Makes for crappy parables.

But many of Jesus' parables specifically include vineyards, like today's does. Again: Wine was normal.

Alcohol in agricultural societies has been a way to save perishable produce long after those calories would otherwise rot away: grain to beer, apples to cider, grapes to wine. This is what people did before refrigeration, you know? It's what they still do in places without it.

But when Jesus used the image of a vineyard specifically, he chose it for a particular reason: to indicate Jerusalem, and more specifically, indicate the religious elite of Jerusalem. We'll see this again in a month or so. Those "who had ears to hear," who wanted to be insiders and understand what Jesus was saying, they got this immediately. Jesus' enemies get this, too.

"Vineyard" in today's parable is linked to "Jerusalem" and especially the "religious elite" of Jerusalem.

This doesn't come out of thin air. God himself tells a parable in Isaiah 5 about a vineyard, a parable condemning Israel, and this is the punch-line: "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." We could talk about other examples in other places.

When Jesus is talking about vineyards, like he does today, he's talking about Jerusalem and especially its

religious elite. We have to keep this in mind.

Particular Things: The Point

We'll start at the end, because I want us to keep it mind.

Jesus says at the end of today's passage: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." This is the point of the parable; how he makes the point matters just as much as the point, I think, but this is the point.

It's a line that we more or less read last week. Just before today, Jesus had said, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

It seems to be a sort of principle that Jesus operates on. But it smacks of unfairness, doesn't it? Or outright confusion.

In what universe does it make sense that the first get last place, and those in last place get to be first? This makes no sense. First, by definition, isn't last, right? This makes no sense. And it's not meant to, apart from a very specific context: the context of this parable. It's meant to be a riddle, because riddles demand solutions.

This principle, this riddle, that the first become last, and the last become first, does have a context, though, right? It's the story Jesus gives. We can't make

sense of this nonsensical, riddle-principle without today's parable.

Last week by our reckoning, moments ago by Jesus', we saw him interact with a wealthy, young, faithful young man, a real success, you know, and that young man became a symbol for the way the rich, who are first in this world, can end up last to the Kingdom of Heaven. Just like that real moment became an opportunity for Jesus to talk about the truth of how "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first," it's today's parable that will give us more insight into this same truth.

So we should talk about today's scene, right?

Equality & "A Day's Pay"

Let's start by pointing out that the first workers got paid what was fair. They got paid what was fair. A denarius was, by definition, a day's pay; it was the standard pay for a day laborer, sun-up to sun-down.

So when the vineyard owner offers a day's worth of pay for a days worth of work to those first workers, no one would have objected. It's not fair or unfair; it's what a day's worth of work is worth. It's typical. No one would have expected more or would have expected less. The workers who were brought in at noon, at three, at five--with almost no time left to work at all--they would have expected less.

And the foremen, the yard boss, starts, in reverse order, paying the workers, and when the last people hired, who worked an hour, get a full day's pay, man: those morning workers are excited, you know? "They expected to earn more," Jesus says.

How can anyone expect otherwise? If those who worked an hour get a full day's pay, then doesn't it make sense that those who work a full day get a lot more than a full day's pay? A week's worth of pay? Longer? There's a strong psychological cocktail going on here, and the parable draws us in to feel what the those workers feel.

Particulars: Self-Assured Entitlement

First of all, we feel deserving; we know what we expect, and feel completely confident in it. Then, we see people get, by all standards, more than they deserve. We feel even more justified in what we deserve, so sure of what we deserve that it's only reasonable to us that we should get some overabundance that matches theirs.

If they got more than they deserve, we who do deserve should get far more than them. If they got more than they deserve, we who do deserve should get far more than them.

We can call this many things. I'd like to call it self-

assured entitlement. And entitlement, if it's anything, is expecting to get more than you deserve.

This is a parable aimed at those who will identify with the people who, consciously or not, "expect to receive more," who identify not with the people who worked an hour and got a day's pay, but those who identify with the ones who have been faithful to the contract, working hard, all day long. I would guess that most of us, as we heard this, identified with the "that's not fair" crowd, not with the "this is so awesome and unexpected" crowd. We'll talk about this again.

Particulars: Noticing Interactions

And these first workers, out of their self-assured entitlement, because they believe that they deserve more than a day's pay for the day's work they did--having convinced themselves so quickly that they were deserving--they resent the owner.

And they feel freedom to resent him. They give voice to their resentment:

"you have made these guys who were hired last and who worked only an hour equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day."

I feel for these guys, you know? They got their pay, only what they were promised, not what, while they

were waiting in line, they had begun to feel entitled to. They begin to grumble against the landowner. These people who didn't work nearly as hard as they did are treated like their equals. And these hard-working first hires, they don't feel equal to those slouches; they're better than they are. They're more deserving. They're harder working.

Like many of us, too many of us, their sense of value comes from what they're paid, and comes from being better than whoever they decide they are better than-- definitely people who couldn't get hired till the day was almost over, laborer dregs, barely working at all. The last ones chosen at the day laborer curb.

And the vineyard owner speaks up, addressing one of them in particular:

'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

The last question, "Are you envious because I am generous," that's a pointed question. These guys think they are better than the people who only worked an hour; you know what virtuous people don't do? Especially in a society built around honor and shame?

They don't envy people for their good fortune.

But while these men, out of their new-found entitlement, grumble and complain against the landowner who hired them and paid them fairly, he starts by calling the one he addresses, "friend."

Noticing Interactions: "Friend"

I don't know how to read this. He could be being kind, reaching out. We've talked about friends before, though, during this time. Friends weren't people you hung out with, they were your social equals, those who you could give and receive favors from without having to keep track or get the equivalent of a "Julius is awesome, he paid for my goat" tattoo on your forehead.

Friends were people you weren't ever in debt too, or always in debt too; it didn't matter: they'd give, you'd give, it was a relationship of equals in a society that carefully measured who was better and who was worse. These grumbling guys have been measuring who was better and who was worse out in the vines, and they believe they're better: And I wonder, although I can't prove it, if when the vineyard owner calls the grumbling guy "friend," if he isn't doing it ironically, sarcastically, and pointing out to the guy: You are not my equal. I am the one with power in this moment, in this situation, and in our society. I call you friend, but you are not my friend, you are my hired

hand, and I have paid you fairly.

This makes sense to me. I mean, Jesus' first audience, when they heard this story, I think they would have gotten this immediately, been like, "What? Friend? They aren't friends? Dude's a paid laborer, and he owns the vineyard. These guys aren't peers; they owner is poking the guy."

The other way to read this is as a peace-making move, the vineyard owner is calling him friend, the way we use the term, to build a bridge, get the grumbling guy to hear what he wants to tell him. But I just don't think that's what's going on; friend didn't mean that 2,000 years ago. That's what I'd do, now; not what a wealthy land-owning patron in the ancient near east would say to an entitled day laborer who's grumbling about getting paid fairly.

So, having put the man in his place--I think, I'm convinced of it, actually--but having put the man in his place, he continues:

Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

Does the landowner have the right do what he wants with his own money? Yes. If these men are as virtuous as they think, can they be envious of another person's good fortune? No. And they can't be angry at the vineyard owners generosity, either: they were paid fairly, paid what they agreed to.

Principle-Riddle: Solution

And Jesus ends with that line, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

In the parable, the last people hired were, literally, the first people paid, right? And the first people hired were, literally, the last people paid. There you go: Last will be first, and the first will be last.

But figuratively, metaphorically, the last people also came out of that day with the very best deal, right? I mean: Day's pay, hour worked: Nice. That is a trophy. That is a win.

The last people who were hired were paid well, paid appropriately. Paid just like the others. But ultimately, they got put in their place. They believed they were practically equal to the landowner, able to grumble against him, they believed they were better than the others who received his generosity. One was addressed as "friend," to his shame, and the were called out for their dishonorable envy. That's a hard day, you know? That's no triumphal entry; that's

sneaking in before the door shuts.

Ears to Hear?

But we have “ears to hear,” right? I don't know if we remember, but there's an invitation Jesus makes with most of the parables he tells in Matthew: “Whoever has ears to hear, listen!” Jesus invites us, if we believe we're insiders, to understand what he's saying.

We could say, oh, that the vineyard is all at once the the religious life, the religious hopes, and the religious people of Israel. And the vineyard owner, well: that's God, right? God is the landowner. We could explore the promise God gives to His People in the Old Testament, a promise of Land, and the way that Jesus expands that into a promise of the whole world, “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.”

And those first workers? The ones who show up early, were chosen by the land owner to earn honest pay for their honest labor? These self-assured, entitled workers who are eventually put in their place, at the end of the day they're the Pharisees, the Scribes, all their ilk. They've already begun to plan his murder, watched as he's knocked down Torah, knocked down cleanliness laws, knockdown Sabbath rules.

Ears To Hear: “Early In The Day”

The Israelites were chosen by God, “early in the day,” a long, long time before Jesus, and they were promised

something for their hiring. Remember the promises that God gave to Abraham when he called him, promises that came out of nowhere, were totally undeserving? God said “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Jesus perceives the Israelites as those workers who were hired first, and promised something for their hiring. But as we’ve seen over and over, especially among those Pharisees and Scribes that Jesus interacts with, they became exclusive. They got that Israel was God’s “chosen people,” but forgot that they were “chosen” for the benefit of God and the people around them, “others,” “them,” out there.

And in this parable, it’s those “others,” who God is being generous to. And we might be tempted to think that the others are us, gentiles, those who aren’t Israelites at all, I think that what Jesus is really hitting home is the way his gospel connects with the “tax collectors, the sinners, the prostitutes,” those who, as he says elsewhere when he talks to the Pharisees, “are coming into the Kingdom ahead of you.”

The “point” of the parable:

So, in telling this story, Jesus is communicating to those Israelites who are self-assured and believe they

are entitled to the blessings and benefits that come from being God's chosen people: The Pharisees, the Scribes, the religious elite who argue with Jesus everywhere he goes. They've been so faithful. They've worked so hard. They've done what the landowner, what God, has asked of them.

And if prostitutes and johns, roman collaborators and cheats, all those who are ritually unclean are going to get what Jesus is promising--salvation, understood in all sorts of ways, all God's promises coming true for them, personally--if "those sort of people" are going to get the rewards that come with faithfulness, then, geeze, what awesome stuff is God going to give to those who have been faithful all along!? Because they are clearly better than these slouchy late-comers.

But the truth is that they aren't. They *are* equal to these late-comers. And if we know anything about the Pharisees and their ilk, they don't believe that. But they are equal recipients of God's generosity. They haven't earned special privileges in the vineyard; it's God's, not theirs. And God has a right to do what he wants in his Kingdom, with his mercy, no matter what the grumbling Pharisees think about it.

An Alternative "Point?"

I've wondered, although you'd have to really make a tight argument, but I'd believe it if you made it well, if Jesus isn't communicating not to the Pharisees around

him, but maybe to even his own first disciples.

I mean, the Twelve could be resentful of those who are showing up, now, when Jesus seems popular, but who laughed them off three years ago. The Twelve just came to Jesus saying, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus promised them amazing reward and role in Kingdom Come. They were positioned to think about how glad they weren't that rich, young guy. They might be tempted, now or as time goes on, to give into the Pharisees' way of pride, of self-assured entitlement.

Making Meaning:

In the end, though, whatever group of people we think Jesus is focusing on, we could summarize the parable's point this way:

A group of people believes that they are deserving, are entitled, to more from God than what others receive because they have been faithful longer. More blessing, more reward or compensation. They believe they are not equal to those who are coming to God later than they did, but better than those late-comers.

A group of people believes that they are deserving, are entitled, to more from God than what others receive because they have been faithful longer.

This is how today's parable relates to the real life going on around Jesus.

Jesus assumes those he speaks to will identify with the grumblers, the self-assured and entitled. We did, right? It's just how the story is told. It doesn't end on a "And the one-hour workers kicked up their heels praising God as they went."

We have to ask, when we come to this parable, not something irrelevant, but maybe healthy and good to ask: You know, questions like, "Do I grumble against my boss when coworkers are acknowledge and I'm not?" or "What kind of manager should I be to those I supervise?" Nice questions; important. Not relevant to the story.

There are questions we can ask ourselves that bridge the gap between Jesus' first audience and us well, though.

Questions: Entitlement

The first has to do with entitlement. We get what the word means, right? It's a belief that we have a right to something.

Because of who we know, because of where we are, because of what society has taught us, we feel entitled to things. This is a function of class, definitely, but also attendance. Poor, broken people don't feel entitled to

much in our society, unless they've been around some place for a long time. It seems like more than anything else, attendance, doing something for awhile with the same people, that's what breeds entitlement.

If we're leaping from what Jesus "really means" in today's parable to our own situation, we have to ask, and this is personal question, if we believe we are entitled to some religious benefit, some reward from God, something more than others should get, because we've been faithful longer than they have.

Do we believe we "should" get the benefits of God's Presence more than others? As a part of Smoky Row, do we believe that because we've been here 30 years, or because we have built this or that, or given this or that, or done this or that, we are entitled to some religious benefit more than others who have just shown up are entitled to it? Only each of us, with the insight of those we love, could answer that question.

Or, if we've been raised in the Church, following Jesus as long as we can really remember, do we think we're entitled to, oh gosh, any number of benefits: protection from illness, freedom from hassle, financial security, whatever it is?

And entitlement and responsibility get their wires crossed easily, you know? Those with power--and being around for a long time is a kind of power--those with power forget that their power is not a function of

their presence, but it's a function of God's blessing. Familiarity may not breed contempt, but it does breed entitlement, the belief that we have a right to certain things, and many of us are familiar with God, with Church, with the rules of the slice of Christian Culture that we're a part of.

Any of us who have been around something for a long time--some job, some relationship, some place—we might have come to believe we have more rights, more freedoms, more benefits, than those who have recently shown up. And that's an attitude that Christ condemns. It's anti-Kingdom of Heaven.

And while the most immediate context for applying these questions is our faith context--Smoky Row, our Life Groups, the relationships we have with each other, our jobs, some of us--in general, we could go out and consider all those places where we have been regular attenders for a long time, and examine our entitlement. Do we think we are better than those who have just shown up, do we believe that we should be getting more than they should? And is that, oh, not right or wrong--is that constructive or destructive?

Questions: Envy & Identity

Let's cast a wider net:

What does God have rights over?

Jesus gives to the vineyard owner in his story, who represents God, the phrase, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?” This truth is all the more poignant, given that Jesus just allowed a rich young man to do what he wanted with his money, and he couldn't let it go.

But is salvation God’s? Are the blessings of friendship with Jesus ours to dole out, or Jesus’? And we’re smart, we know the answers. But I am so good at condemning those who follow Christ in a way that I think is, honestly, dumb or misguided. None of you all--those out there, in that denomination, or that congregation, or whatever.

If Jesus returns this afternoon, I could find myself saying, “You’re making that person equal to me?” Because I believe, in my heart, I am better than them. “Don’t you know that they just started following you, and their theology is a mess, man. Or: their consumption patterns, their lifestyle, their commitments: whatever it is that I know I’m more faithful in than they are, than they should be by now.”

It’s hard to pray, “Come Lord Jesus,” when you know, if you’re honest, that him showing up means you having to abandon your self-assured pride.

Conclusion:

There’s other things that we could think about. But I

think these questions--do we believe we're entitled to God's blessings and the benefits of faithfulness more than others, and do we believe that we're better than others who God has invited into his Church--these are the ones that drive home Jesus' point in today's parable.

I hope we can think about them, you know?

God's generous. God is good. We have come late to this following Jesus game. People have been doing it for 2,000 years, and yet we still somehow end up in that group of those who believe they're more deserving than whoever comes after them. It's a hard pattern to resist, but we can resist it, and I think we are. One of the easiest ways to do this is to spend a lot of time loving and befriending those who believe that they are undeserving of any blessing from God--and proving them wrong through our consistent compassionate presence.

If the first hires had just made friends with the late-comers, they wouldn't have been so upset to be thought their equals. If they had shared their packed lunches, their water, their tools, their insight about the vineyard.

But entitlement and believing you're better than another person has a way of crowding out friendship and love. Let's always reject those terrible things, and

see if we can experience more of the friendship and love--with people, and with our generous God. We don't want to, in thinking we're first, find out we're last; but with humility and kindness, if we care for those who both the world and the self-assured, entitled, and proud Christians among us say are last, are least deserving, we may discover more blessing from God than we could ask for or imagine.