

## **Welcoming the “Newbies”—Matthew 20:1-16**

I have a confession. It has taken me a long time to like the parable that was just read for us. I’m with those workers who worked all day and who received no more than the newbies who came at 5 pm and worked for an hour. I want to cry out, “that’s not fair.” So if the parable bothered you, you have company.

At the same time, as I’ve sat with the parable, I see that the parable tells me a lot more about me than I’d like to admit. But let’s look at the story.

### **The story**

Jesus begins by saying that this story will tell us something about what the kingdom of heaven is like. That is, it is about what life ought to be like where Jesus is recognized as Lord—ultimately in all the earth, but certainly now, among his people. So, the point of the story is not about fair wages or management-labor relationships but something much bigger.

In the story, it’s time for the grape harvest—when the grapes are neither over or under ripe—and like most harvests, there is a narrow window for gathering the harvest. As in many parts of the world, this was done by a temporary labor force of day-laborers. These were poor, manual laborers. They may have lost their own land due to debt. They might be immigrants and refugees—fleeing famine or trouble. It was a hand to mouth existence. They hoped for work so they could eat and feed their families for the next day. Those needing work would gather in the public square of the town but couldn’t do anything until hired. Some were already there at sunrise, about 6 am.

It’s striking that the landowner goes himself rather than sending a foreman or one of his own workers. He agrees to pay them a denarius, the standard day’s wage, and they head off to work. As the day proceeds, he makes several more trips—at 9, at noon, and 3. Each time, he agrees to pay them what is right. They probably assumed, as we would, that it would be something less than a denarius. Finally, at 5 pm, the landowner can see that he still needs more workers to finish the job. A delayed harvest could be a lost harvest. He finds some workers and asks why they were still standing around—perhaps in a hot dusty marketplace, wondering what they will eat without money. They remind him that they cannot work without being hired. Their choice to wait in the marketplace means nothing unless the

owner chooses them. He does, and they go to work for the last hour or so of the day.

Day laborers were paid each day, so that they could buy something to eat. But the owner does some surprising things. He pays them in inverse order to the amount of time they worked—the last hired first, the first last. What a surprise when the last get a full day's wage, as do all of those hired at earlier times, and finally those hired at the beginning of the day. If they had been paid first, they probably wouldn't have been around to see what the others received.

As it is set up, they are very unhappy. This is not fair. Those who worked only an hour were paid equal to them, and they don't like the idea of equal pay for unequal work. So one of them goes to the owner with their complaint.

First of all, the owner calls him friend. The owner cares for and values the workers. Second, he reminds them of their agreement, and that he has kept it (which wasn't always the case). And third, he re-frames their argument. He reminds them that it is not about fairness but generosity with his own money. Those other workers needed the full day's wage as much as they did, and if he wanted those hired later to have it, who were they to object?

### **So what does this tell us about the kingdom of heaven?**

First, the king is large-hearted, he wants as many as possible to share in the benefits of harvesting with him, even the “newbies” who join at “the eleventh hour.”

He is generous and not fair with the blessings of being included in his kingdom. He chooses whoever will come, at whatever hour. If God were only fair, which blessings would be taken from the less “deserving’—new life in Christ? forgiveness and reconciliation? belonging to God's people? being filled and transformed and gifted by his Spirit? being welcome to his table? being protected by his angels? being called to a life of purpose? being carried across the river of death to be with the Lord to be raised to rule with Him in his new creation? Which would we forgo? Which would we take from another in the interest of fairness?

And if it were a matter of fairness only, what would we receive? The payment of the last first and the idea of last being first and first last reminds us that we might not have a good idea of our place. No doubt, we will be surprised! The wonder

though is that because of the generosity of God, all the blessings of kingdom membership that I listed, and more are given us whether we have been following Jesus 50 years or take our first baby steps to do so this day.

Finally, there is an urgent need that brings together harvest and harvesters. There are workers depending on being chosen to literally live, as well as grapes at just the right ripeness. Jesus said elsewhere that the harvest is plentiful and the workers few, so pray to the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest.

### **So, how will we think about the “newbies?”**

Are we as keenly aware of Jesus about the great harvest and the need for workers? I think we are. We already are engaged in that work in our community. It's amazing how God has multiplied our few loaves to help so many. But there are so few of us in an immediate area with 100,000 residents or more. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a few more or maybe many more to join us? But they will all be newbies! So how will we react?

First of all, Lord willing, God will send us a pastor. Are we praying for that and that God will prepare our hearts for that person? How will we treat him or her? That person will not be Rich, who walked with us over 14 years. They will be new. But they are a brother or sister who has been blessed with all the generous blessings of God, as have we, blessings that are not earned by how long they are with us.

Hopefully, as we emerge from the pandemic and as we are joined by a new pastor, there will be several new people by next New Years we don't know today. In five years, I think we'd hope that most of us are people who aren't here today. What will it mean to open our hearts to them? Will we treat them as full members of the kingdom enjoying the same blessings we enjoy? What if it means stepping aside to allow someone else to step up, or affirming someone as they lead into a new area of ministry we hadn't dreamed of?

The fact that I struggle with this parable invites me to ask God to enlarge my heart both to receive his generosity in my own life and welcome his generosity to and through others I pray He will bring us. I don't want to be that envious worker who grumbles when others display God's generous gifts. And I suspect that you don't want to be that envious worker either. God wants to help us with that. Will you let Him?