

FAIRY TALE ENDINGS
MATTHEW 20:1-15
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
5 SEPTEMBER 2021

Our text today comes from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 20, verses 1-15. Listen once more for the word of God.

“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?’

The word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

I’m going to give you four words, four words that begin a million stories, and I want you to tell me — or imagine, as it were, because I know y’all aren’t the shouting type — how any one of those million stories ends.

Ready? Four words. *Once upon a time.*

How does that story end?

I'll give you a hint: six words, beginning with a conjunction. Got it?
And they lived happily ever after.

Cinderella, the *Three Little Pigs*, the *Gingerbread Man*. They all lived happily ever after. And even when the story didn't end with those famous last words, thanks to Disney Animation Studios the sense of the ending remained. *The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*, and my all-time favorite, *Aladdin* each end with beloved characters overcoming second-act adversity, defeating evil, and riding off into the sunset of forever. Happily ever after.

For my 8th birthday I was gifted five copies of *Aladdin*. Five copies from five different people. And you might think that we returned four of them, but my parents had the sense to know that I was going to burn through each, scratch the VHS beyond recognition. I must have watched *Aladdin* ten times a week. The music, the sheer force of Robin Williams's comedic genius, the unstoppable romance between Jasmine and Aladdin, and the sense of relief when, despite Jafar's nefarious plans, the boy gets the girl and the two live *happily ever after*.

Outside of the walls of my home the tumult of a decade raged. Desert Storm, a nebulous economy, the crisis of AIDs and its attendant culture wars. But in my den, with my VHS tapes, order prevailed and all the world was happily ever after.

In some ways, Matthew's parables unfold like fairy tales. Most often they begin with iconic words unique to the gospel, "the kingdom of heaven is like."

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field,
a grain of mustard seed,
a net that gathers fish,
a woman who lost a coin, and
a merchant in search of fine pearls.

All of those kingdom stories remember well in me. They make sense, offer comfort — there is no faith too small, no coin left to collect dust. They remind me, in that way, of fairy tales. All's well that ends well.

But today the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.

A landowner who gathers workers and then pays all the johnny-come-latelys the same wage as those who labored under the heat of the day, from whom grime and sweat dripped into the fertile soil. Today the kingdom is like a man given \$500 for just showing up, while another, back aching, clothes torn, gasping for air, is given the same.

How did today's parable make you feel? Warm, coddled, happy ever after? Or, like me, a bit annoyed on behalf of the early crew?

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Today's parable can be easily separated into two segments – the laborers and the conflict.

In the first, a householder arrives at market at 6:00am and hires a gaggle of workers. They agree on a specific wage – a denarius, the Greek says, which most scholars believe could feed a family for three to six days. The workers set out to fulfill their obligation.

But then at nine o'clock something gets in the householder's craw and he decides to return to the market. There is no sense in the text that the vineyard was under-staffed, no sense that there were not enough workers in the early crew. He goes because he is free to go. Finding at the market some folks in search of work he returns to the fields with a second brood of laborers, having agreed rather more vaguely to pay them "what is right."

Perhaps you don't find that odd. After all, what's the harm in hiring more workers while it is still early? But then at noon, with the day halfway done, he goes out *again*.

And it doesn't stop there – at three o'clock he returns again to the market. To his delight, there are laborers in search of work. Perhaps they had just arrived after a long day in another vineyard, perhaps they had only just reached the market after a long day of travel. Perhaps they were just in the right place at the right time. Either way, they agree to go with the householder and are taken to the vineyard, this time without indication of their compensation.

The householder seems to be acting on whimsy and impulse *especially* when he returns at five. By the time he brought the labors from the five o'clock draw back to the vineyard the day was done. They wouldn't have had time to break a sweat before they were all called together to receive their pay.

The householder, a common image for God in Jewish folklore, seems motivated not by the needs the vineyard, but by the desire to *welcome more workers into his fields*.

End the parable there and you have an uncomplicated happily ever after. The kingdom of heaven is a place with enough room, enough work, enough space for more and more and more laborers, and God is the God who returns time-and-again, ensuring no one is uninvited.

The problem, and this is often the problem, is that the bringing-in of laborers, while a critical component of the parable and a vivid portrait of God is not the whole story. There is more to be had, and spoiler: this is where it gets tricky.

The householder calls his manager to pay the laborers, insisting that he begin at the end, pay first the "laborers" whose shirts were still crisp and brows were still dry.

When the manager pressed a denarius — which, remember, is the wage the early crew was promised — into the palm of the last hired worker, I imagine the six o'clock crew beginning to stand a little taller, wiping the sweat from their brows, proudly puffing their chests as they anticipated their reward.

If the five o'clock crew got a denarius for less than an hour, certainly the early crew would get 12 denarii, nearly two-and-a-half months worth of provisions for their family! Wouldn't that be a fairy-tale ending?

The gospel writer doesn't tell us how the five o'clock cohort, and then the three o'clock brood, the noon gaggle, and the nine o'clock caucus received their pay. I imagine with some confusion, though that certainly gave way to joyful disbelief. None had negotiated pay, and each was given more than they deserved.

Finally the manager pressed a denarius in to the palm of the first worker hired. 12 hours. One coin. Twelve hours under the hot Mediterranean sun and he was paid the same as the guy who barely worked 15 minutes.

A quick interjection: how does this parable make you feel? Pay attention to that.

By this point in the story a dawning realization sets in: this parable is not *only* about God's graciousness in calling and providing. It is also, perhaps primarily, about how we respond to that grace. Not the grace we are given, the grace given to those we think deserve less than us. JV grace. B team grace.

And how does the early crew respond? "You have made them equal to us," the worker growls. He speaks with spite, but he's right, isn't he? The sting of the story is its the equalizing, *they* — who deserve nothing — are treated no differently than we who have labored all the day long.

"You have made them equal to us."

Though spoken with a scoff, the laborer cuts to the heart of the gospel; through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have each been made equal with one another. The six o'clock crew, the 9am gaggle, the noon set, and all the rest. Not because they worked hard, not because God pitied those who show up late. No, because God is gracious, and God desires that, no matter when we show up, we all work the land in the kingdom of heaven.

Here at Westminster we seek to be a people of *joy*. We are joyful because God has called us and we are grateful for the calling. This week I've been thinking a lot about joy, because it seems to be in short supply.

Outside these walls we are greeted with a litany of dismay. Afghans, especially women and children, cowering in fear as the Taliban raises its flag. Families of service members taking on that tragic moniker "Gold Star." Pediatric ICUs overrun, Covid rampaging, a devastating hurricane affecting the lives of millions.

“Joy,” wrote Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

Where is God in this moment and how can we be a people of joy amidst it all?

Years ago I read an interview given by Stephen Colbert to Oprah Winfrey. Colbert, recounting the tragedy of losing his father and two brothers in a plane crash when he was young, tells Oprah that he finds sustenance in his faith. “Joy can be hard,” Colbert notes, “Joy is not the same thing as happiness...happiness is overrated...happiness can be really facile.”

Strange though it is, I think the early morning crew, the ones with whom we (or at least I) are most likely to sympathize can teach us something about joy in the kingdom of God. They see the work of God first hand and they benefit from God’s welcome but they grumble when others are offered the same. It’s easy to do, reasonable even, just like it’s easy to imagine the guilt the noon crew felt when they received unmerited a gift of sustenance.

But the grace we receive is not about the work we do (or fail to do). It is about the God who calls us into the vineyard, and grants *all equally* the opportunity to labor in the upbuilding of the kingdom.

“The grace of God,” wrote F. Buechner, “means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn’t ave been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you ... There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.”

I fear that we are sustaining ourselves as a Christian community on a frail, facile, fleeting view of *the happy ever after* when we are called instead to the joyful kingdom – the kingdom where lion and lamb find rest together, where the six am crew celebrates their good fortune with the late crowd. Make no mistake, God is not yet done with the kingdom. Beautiful and terrible things will happen along the way, but God will sustain us. All of us.

Where is God in 2021? God is the householder going out ahead of us until all are welcomed in. God is in the marketplace searching. God is the one providing for the last hired and the first, and God asks only that we take that provision and do the same.

Especially now, especially today, especially when the world outside these walls seems so cruel, we are called to be a people of joy. We are called to rejoice in the salvation of all the rest, to celebrate the good fortune of a God who comes looking, of a God who is present in Afghanistan, present in courts of justice, present in ICUs and in the eye of a hurricane. And we are called to imitate that God. So that even now, we can go in search, pay lavishly, and rejoice in the absurdity of having *been* at all, and having the opportunity still to be a people where there once was none.

Hard work can be a gift of God, but it is not what will save us. The things we accrue are not God's grace. Just having been called, being here is a gift of God, whether you are a part of the early crew or your found yourself at the party at last call. The denarius of grace is ours, and it is enough. But we have to take it. In that gift there is *joy ever after*.

Stop grumbling and get to work. Take the denarius, there is more in God's kingdom.