

“The End of the Line”  
Matthew 20:1-16  
26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
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If there's one parable that has gotten the most PUSHBACK from every congregation I've served, this parable would be it.

Why?

You know why.

Because someone in these pews right now is thinking:

That's not fair!

The late-in-the-day workers get paid as much as the early morning workers?

That's not fair.

If I was with those early morning workers, I'd be grumbling right along with them.

How many of you would be grumbling right along with them?

It's like the parable of the prodigal.

Prodigal gets a party.

The older brother gets taken for granted.

It's not fair.

But I don't get the pushback on the parable of the prodigal that I always get on this parable...and maybe that's because of the line.

It sounds like there's a line.

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Think for a moment about the last time you were in line.

Think back to when the hurricane hit at the end of September. Power is out, none of us know when it will come back on. And then you see trucks, workers who have arrived from all parts of the country, ready to restore Greenville's power!

But it's not coming back on all at once.  
There's going to be a line, right?  
None of us had a clue where we were in line.

Some had a two-day wait.  
Others had what—an 11 or 12 day wait?  
Nothing you could do about it.

You didn't choose the line.  
You couldn't change the line.  
You just found yourself in line.

What was that like?

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.”

Sounds like those early morning workers were FIRST in line.  
Why were they first in line?

It's easy to make assumptions here.

It's easy to assume that the landowner hired them because of their discipline and their desire and their good work ethic—and that's why they find themselves with a job.

But is that what the text says?

The only thing we know about them is that they were looking for work, at the marketplace early, ready to be hired.

Which, by the way, just might hold true for EVERY worker in this story. The parable doesn't say that the other workers weren't there early in the day. It just says that the landowner chose some workers early in the day.

In fact, there's a phrase in this story that's important, and the English translation is a bit misleading.

The phrase is "standing idle."

As biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine points out, it implies that the workers standing idle in the marketplace were prone to idleness, that they were lazy, goof-offs...

But that's not what the Greek actually says.  
The Greek here actually means "without work."<sup>1</sup>

Listen again:

"When he went out again at nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle [without work] in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went."

Same thing happens at noon.  
And at three o'clock. And at five o'clock.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, New York: HarperCollins, 2014.

The landowner even asks the five o'clock workers:  
"Why are you standing here idle all day?"

To which they reply:  
"Because no one has hired us."

In other words, all the workers were in the same boat.  
Those hired at 9a were without work.  
Those at noon were without work.  
Those hired at 3p...without work.  
At 5p...without work.

According to Jesus, the late-in-the-day workers were not less deserving people.

They were just people.  
Hoping to be hired.  
Waiting to be hired.

Perhaps waiting isn't the right word.  
Perhaps the right word here is...desperate.

Desperate to be hired.

I want you to picture what it's like to be one of those workers at 4:30p...you've been waiting in the marketplace all day...and if you don't work that day, you don't have money to buy food for your family.

There's no salary.  
You get paid at the end of each day.

Can you imagine being a parent, and going home, and telling your children there's no dinner that night, that you can't feed them that night?

It's a helpless feeling.

A humiliating feeling.

It's what those late in the day workers were feeling at 4:30...so when the landowner asks them to work, it's the best news in the world! Who knows what the pay will be, but it doesn't matter...

At least it will be something.

And then it turns out to be more than something.

When the laborers line up, those who were last get paid first.

And what do they get paid?

The usual daily wage!

It's enough to feed their family.

Can you picture them at that point?

Relieved. Overjoyed.

Laughing, patting one another on the back?

They are grateful beyond words...

What a scene.

And then it becomes an even more interesting scene.

Because those early morning workers get paid the same thing.

It was what they agreed on. It's enough to feed their families.

But what's their response?

They grumble!

It sounds like those early workers are not just hard working people.

It sounds like they're forgetful people.

It sounds like they forgot how they got into the vineyard to begin with...

Does the text say that they sought out the landowner, asked for an interview, handed him a sterling resume?

No, not at all.

The text says that the landowner sought them out.

The text says that the landowner found them, called them, brought them into his vineyard.

Which means working in the vineyard...is a gift!

An early Christian definition of being lost...was to have amnesia.  
To forget.

To forget how you got to be where you are.

Those early morning workers...they forgot why they were able to work in the first place. Why they could feed their families in the first place.

And instead of being grateful...they chose to grumble.

Have you ever done that before?

Lost sight of the big picture, and instead of being grateful, you decided to grumble?

Let me go back to the hurricane one more time.

We were one of the fortunate ones.

We got our power back on that very first Sunday, September 29.

So the week goes by, and it's late in the afternoon the following Saturday, October 5<sup>th</sup>.

I'm at the office.

I get a text from Duke Energy.

Power outage in your neighborhood.

We hope to have it restored by 11:45p on Sunday.

Wait...what??!!  
 This can't be true.  
 I come home, and it's true.  
 No....no, no, no, no!!!

What happened?  
 I'll tell you what happened.

Some neighbors at the end of our block were having their trees cut down by a crew that somehow cut off a tree limb which landed on the main power line to our block and WHOOSH...

Power is out for a second time.  
 Hmm...where do you think we NOW stood in Duke's lineup?  
 That's right.

END OF THE LINE.

You think those early morning workers were grumbling?  
 You should have heard me grumbling on that Saturday.

It meant that two Sundays in a row, I'm taking a cold shower with no coffee before I come in to preach. Maybe some of you asked me that second Sunday after the hurricane how I was doing, and I told you everything was fine.

Did we have that conversation?  
 Maybe you and I had that conversation.  
 Guess what?  
 I was lying.  
 I was NOT fine.

Why?  
 Because I did not want to be...at the end of the line.

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All of which brings me to an important question.  
I've been trying to avoid it throughout this sermon.  
But there's just no avoiding it.

***When you first heard this morning's parable, where did you find yourself in line?***

We'd like to imagine that we're near the front of the line.

That with all our hard work, and all the time and treasure we've given away, and because we try to be faithful with all God has given us, we should be near the front of God's line.

It's easy to think that.

But what if that's not what this parable is about?  
What if this parable isn't about standing in line at all?  
What if it's just about where we find ourselves standing?

Have you ever found yourself standing someplace, not in line, but in life...and it wasn't where you expected to be.

A diagnosis is not good,  
a job disappears,  
someone you love is in a difficult  
spot...and you find yourself standing in the same place as the late in the day workers.

It's 4:30 in the afternoon, and you don't care about fair.  
You're desperate.  
Hoping, praying that the landowner will come out one more time.

That the landowner will reach out to you.



That the landowner will claim you.

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The pastor Scott Jones told a story recently about a friend of a friend who lives in Chicago.

This friend of a friend, he had a nice family including his oldest son who had just graduated high school, whom he loved very much.

After his son graduated, this child started to distance himself from his family and plunged headlong into the drug culture in Chicago.

Over a year goes by.  
Then it's 18 months.  
They don't hear from their son.

And then one Sunday morning at 2:00 a.m, they get a call and it's the police. "We have your son. He's had a DUI. You have to come pick him up."

This father does what any father would do. He gets out of bed, goes down to the precinct, and explains who he is and that he's here for his son. They look at him perplexed. They have no idea what's he's talking about.

OK, it's Chicago, I'm sure there's a lot of precincts.

So, he goes to the next precinct. Same thing.  
He goes to two more precincts.  
Same story.

So, he decides to go the last place he remembers his son living, which was in a derelict part of town...it was a crack house.

He goes in and people are sleeping all over the place.  
He looks around and he locates his son sleeping on a mattress in a  
back room.

At 5:00 a.m. in this [filthy, dark, awful place], his heart breaks.  
He falls to his knees, then he kisses his son.  
And then this father gets up...and leaves.

About four months later the son shows up at his family's house.  
Then he shows up again three weeks later.  
Then again two weeks later.  
Soon, he's there all the time.

Slowly, he's integrated back into the life of the family.  
His father asks him one day what the heck happened.  
What transpired that took you out of the life you were in?

The son said, "Dad, don't you know? It was that night.

“You know the night you got the call. It was one of my friends  
playing a prank on you. We all laughed thinking about how you would  
have to spend your night in precincts looking for me - imagining the  
look on your face when you go to the officer's desk.

“But the one thing we never imagined is that you'd come to the  
house where I lived. Dad, we saw you coming down the street and we all  
dove for the beds. I wasn't asleep that night. When you walked into my  
room and found me, I knew you'd be so furious at me. I was readying  
myself for you to [cuss me out]...

“You want to know what changed me?  
You didn't [condemn] me.  
You kissed me.

You kissed me and that changed everything.”<sup>2</sup>

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What if this parable isn’t about fair and not fair, but about the character and nature of God?

What is the landowner like in this parable?

The landowner is good.

And the landowner is generous.

And the landowner is relentless...going out into the marketplace again and again and again.

Which is powerful good news, especially if it’s 4:30 in the afternoon in your life right now, and you find yourself at the end of the line.

God has NOT forgotten about you...

If this parable has anything to teach us, it’s that God will surprise all of us, early morning workers and late in the day workers, and everyone in between—God will surprise us with a gift of grace that goes beyond your wildest dreams.

Or as another preacher once put it, the good news of today’s parable is simply this:

When the manager comes at the end of the day, “there is a very good chance that the [joy]...and the gratitude with which he is greeted—will turn out to be our own.”<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> From Scott Jones, “Live and Let Die,” on the Day1 podcast, September 29, 2019, found at [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004330/scott\\_jones\\_live\\_and\\_let\\_die](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2004330/scott_jones_live_and_let_die). I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for drawing my attention to this story.

<sup>3</sup> Barabara Brown Taylor, “Beginning at the End,” in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.