

Latecomers
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

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Sometimes people will say to me, “I apologize for being late for worship. We’ve been trying to get here for the last hour.”

But I tend to hear myself thinking, “I’m impressed that you are here at all, considering all the other demands on your time and all the other places you could be on a Sunday morning.”

It is easy for me to be generous in that moment. The latecomers slip in and I hardly notice. They don’t crowd my pew. My seat is secure. It’s you, who were here on time, you who are trying to concentrate on the service, you who have to scrunch up in the pew to make room, who are inconvenienced, if not irritated, by the latecomers. The thought slips through our minds with little prompting: “Why can’t they get here on time like the rest of us?”

More irritating still is the latecomer on the airplane, just as it is time to close the door and push away from the gate. Why is it they seem to be rewarded for their tardiness by getting a first class seat on a coach class ticket? We hear the flight attendant direct the breathless patron to the big seats explaining that coach is full. Even with this obvious explanation it somehow just doesn't seem fair. Our sense of justice is offended. Unless... unless we are the one who is late, and rewarded with the comfortable seat, lots of leg room and a three course dinner. We know we did nothing to deserve this but isn't it *kind* of Delta to be so generous. We were grateful to have made the flight connection but now with this in addition we are doubly grateful. In a matter of minutes we are less self-conscious and forget all the beady eyes staring through us from the rear of the plane. We buckle up, greet our seat companion, and think, "This is the way flying was meant to be."

Hearing this and similar accounts reminds us how seductive good fortune can be. One moment we are lost, the next we are found, and within an hour we are tempted to think ourselves deserving of our good fortune. No wonder others grow irritable, first at our lateness, then at our manner of handling the abundance of grace extended to us. One of my friends once identified such a moment in the account of the prodigal son's return. The day after his return we imagine him out in the fields saying to the other workers, "I'm back, you know. I'm back from the far country." And they patiently reply, "Yes, you're

back. We are pleased. Your father is pleased. Everyone enjoyed the feast.”

On day two he returns to the fields, “I’m back, I’m back. It feels so good to be back.” And, again, they reply, “Yes, you’re back. We are all happy for you and your good fortune.”

Day three dawns and the same exchange takes place. By now they have all had enough of this and let him know it. “Yes, yes, you are back home on the farm. Now grab a hoe!” (Ernest T. Campbell)

The heart of the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a parallel story to the prodigal son as far as Matthew is concerned, is this: all of us are eleventh-hour workers. That is, none of us is deserving of any reward or extra dividend that comes our way. All of us are latecomers to the distribution of grace. We have done nothing to deserve such a gift but now that we have it we should accept it and express our gratitude while looking for ways to share from our abundance.

This parable is not a guide for company personnel or human resources departments. It is not meant to be taken as a literal outline for labor relations. If it were, the workplace would be in continuing chaos and all who think they are deserving of more share of the profits would be on strike.

Instead, the parable serves to give us a view of the kingdom of God and of “God’s economy”. “This is the way things are in God’s plan,” Matthew seems to be saying. “We’re a long way from achieving such attitudes toward those who get more than they deserve but I just thought you might like to glimpse what God has in mind for us,” Jesus is saying, “This is how things could be.” Remember, it is the parable’s position that all of us are latecomers to the throne of grace and none of us is deserving of the overwhelming abundance that God has heaped on us.

Why can’t we comprehend this foundational theological cornerstone? Is it because we have achieved so much, worked so hard for what we have, sometimes paid more than we should have for much of our stuff? Is that why we are irritated, if not resentful when the latecomer seems to slip in and buy the big house down the street for a song? We may have had our eye on that place, and we don’t like it when a couple from out of state happens to buy it before there is even a sign in the yard.

You *know* why we don’t like it. It just doesn’t seem fair! “It’s too much for too little. The owners should not have taken the first bid. They should have held out for more. Any number of people would have been more than willing to have paid a premium price for that property. What had those out-of-towners done to deserve the best house on the block?”

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard we find the place where we are most uncomfortable with Jesus' story toward the end, in verse 15. The owner is heard to say, "Are you telling me that I cannot be generous with what is mine?" Well, are we?

When we lived in New Orleans a number of years ago the family that lived next door to us moved across the lake north of the city to a farm. They bought a couple of trucks for the farm and found themselves with an extra car which they no longer needed. When I came back from vacation that summer I found the keys and title to the car on my desk. My neighbor, a generous member of the church, had given the three-year-old car to the church for my use. I was overwhelmed but later found the words to express our appreciation, telling him it couldn't have come at a better time as we then had two children who had reached driving age. His gift freed up a vehicle for their use.

Several weeks later a friend and member of the session, who himself drove a five-year-old Cadillac given to him by his wife's uncle, called about something else and then said, in closing, "By the way, I think if Richard had wanted to give you his car he should have just done that instead of giving it to the church and taking a tax write-off." I thought to myself, will we never learn? Can the owner not be generous, imaginative and financially astute with what is his? Apparently not without critical comment. Subsequently, a few months later, I bought the car from the church. That was the end of the squabble. However,

we all seemed to miss the lesson of the parable about generosity and gratitude.

Turn again to the theological questions this parable lifts up. Ask yourself, “What kind of person would I prefer to work for? One that is generous or one who pays the minimum wage he can get away with? And what kind of God would I prefer to live with? One that is generous with my many faults and shortcomings or one that offers no room for mistakes and imperfection and doles out punishment accordingly?”

However, this still is not primarily a parable about God. It is a parable about you and me, and our opportunity to become part of the God movement, the kingdom of heaven on earth, by making our decisions and actions more like those of God, even if we are criticized for doing so. This is a story that says to us, “Yes, you will look to others like a fool when you act generously but you will look to God like a child of the promise. Some will say, ‘What’s got into him? What’s got into her?’” But God will say, “Well done my child. You have warmed my heart.”

What do I hope will come of someone hearing this parable as one addressed to him or her? I hope that such persons will act generously with what is theirs; to give, whether it is their *forgiveness* or their *compassion* or their *patience* or their

financial resources or their *love* or their *interest* and *support*. I hope that we will hear this as a parable about the possibilities for action that are open to us because God has set us free to be generous as God is generous.