

## When Kingdoms Collide

Preached FCCW Virtual Worship Service September 20, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16 and Philippians 1:20-30

Frederick Beuchner once defined a parable as “a small story with a large point.” He was speaking of a metaphorical point, of course. As in, a moral or spiritual lesson to be learned from the parable. But, many of Jesus’ parables also pack a literal point. Like the pointy end of a thumbtack left on the floor, which we accidentally step on in our bare feet in the middle of the night while making our way to the bathroom in pitch darkness. That’s a different kind of point! The kind that wakes us up suddenly when we’re half asleep and gets us hopping on our one good foot while provoking a cuss word or two. There is a certain subset of Jesus’ parables called Kingdom Parables because Jesus usually introduced them by saying, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...” with the parable filling in the blank.

For many Christians, the Kingdom of Heaven is associated with the place where we (hopefully) go when we die. But Kingdom parables don’t tell us much about an afterlife. Their focus is more on this life, and how God believes this life should be. So, they invite us to compare how things actually are to how God would like them to be.

Kingdom Parables cleverly make their point by presenting a storyline which adheres to conventional human wisdom and ways of doing things. Hearers or readers of the parable would thus be drawn into a sense of agreement or approval for what is happening in the story. Suddenly, though the parable reveals that what everyone agrees is the proper way things should be, turn out to not be the way God wants them to be. Which tells the reader that their way of thinking and acting needs a correction in order to bring them in line with the Kingdom of Heaven. That collision of two opposite Kingdoms is the “step on the tack” point of the parable. The “ouch” moment of self-realization for the reader.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard begins with a claim that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. For some unexplained reason though, he returns to the market periodically throughout the day, looking for more workers at 9:00, at noon, at 3:00. Finally, the landowner makes one last trip to the marketplace at 5:00. Just one hour before quitting time! What he finds is that there are still some unemployed laborers hanging on the street corners, kind of like the last kids to get chosen when picking teams in Phys Ed. They would be the workers that nobody else saw fit to hire. They would also be the most desperate. The ones who least afford to go home empty handed. The ones for whom time is running out and hope is getting thin. He asks them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They answer, “Because no one has hired us.”

With every trip back to town to hire increasingly unwanted workers with increasingly greater need, you get the sense that this landowner's determination to get as many workers as possible involved in his vineyard has less to do with what they have to offer him and more about what he can do for them.

That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It is God passionately and persistently gathering those who have stopped expecting life to be fair and so are ripe to discover that God is just and merciful. At the end of the day, the owner gives his manager specific instructions about paying the workers their wages. The last workers hired are to be the first ones paid.

Now the parable says that the first workers; those hired at dawn, were promised a denarius for the day's labor. A denarius was the standard pay rate for day laborers. Not a lot of money. Just about enough to pay for a single day's necessities. Kind of like minimum wage. If the workers who started at dawn were paid first, they would have received their denarius and gone away content that the landowner had kept the bargain he made with them. But because the part timers are intentionally paid before them, the workers who had put in a full day get to see that the latecomers are paid a denarius, also.

Seeing that, maybe the full-timers anticipated getting paid more than the owner had promised. If he was throwing his money around so freely that he could pay a full day's wage to those who worked only half a day, or even just an hour, surely there would be a bonus waiting for them. You or I might have thought the same way. As a matter of fact, we almost certainly do. Which is why we are just as surprised - and maybe just as indignant - as the full-time laborers are when they get paid only the denarius they had agreed to work for. The way Jesus tells this parable intentionally invites us to identify with the sense of unfairness that those hired hands who have put in a whole day of work felt.

We get Jesus' point, that the Kingdom of Heaven runs according to a logic that follows a different course than the way the kingdom of the world reckons value. A "bottoms up" logic that insists that the last will be first and the first will be last. Caught in the collision of between what the Kingdom of Heaven is like and how the kingdoms of earth function, all we can say for ourselves is "ouch." This parable confronts you and me with a decision about which Kingdom we will align ourselves with.

What the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard teaches us about how God's Kingdom works is that our place in it is not earned by the good works we are able to do, but by the goodness of God's love for us. God's pay scale is calculated not according to what you deserve, but according to what God wants to give you. There is no minimum wage for those who are the least deserving so that there can be greater rewards for others. Because God paid the maximum price for every one of us to have a place in this Kingdom. The life of God's Son. The coin of the realm in God's Kingdom is not measured in denarii or dollars. It is measured in grace. And grace is all or nothing.

That is what the parable teaches us about the Kingdom of Heaven. What it teaches us about ourselves can be summed up in a verse from Proverbs 14:12 states, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death."

What this parable teaches us about the Kingdom of Heaven becoming recognizable on earth as it is in heaven is that it begins with each of us choosing faithfully between one and the other. The Kingdom of God is like any story about the first being last and the last being first. It's not the kind of Cinderella Story though, that you're going to be a fan of, if seeing other people with less resources and opportunities, with different skin color or sexual orientation-- being made equal to you. Or, if the idea of God being generous to them makes you feel like you are being treated unfairly. Which is why our world is tilted more to helping the first to stay first. More often than not by ensuring that the last stay put. But those are not the rules by which the Kingdom of Heaven operates.

In the end, the all-day workers got paid every penny they were promised. The unfairness they felt subjected to was not due to anything being denied them--except their sense of entitlement and privilege. What really disturbed them was that the other workers in the vineyard were made equal to them. The landowner exposed the heart of their anger, which was that they were envious about the landowner's generosity to benefit those they were convinced did not deserve it.

Which is the tack on the floor that wakes us up to our own history.

Every move to make the last equal to the first in our nation—from the emancipation of slaves, to the Civil Rights movements to the current movement to expose systemic racism in our society—has been met with virulent resistance from those who feel threatened by others moving closer to equality.

In his Letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul encouraged followers of Christ to “live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” The Christians of Philippi lived under the rule of Caesar and the power of the Roman Empire. But they considered their true and lasting citizenship to be in the Kingdom of Heaven. The values of these two Kingdoms were diametrically opposed to one another. And, when those two Kingdoms collide, we who claim to follow Christ and whose citizenship is first and foremost of the Kingdom of Heaven-- must choose one or the other.

And acting as agents of God’s grace to everyone is the work that you and I as Christians, are called to do.

Copyright 2020 Raymond Medeiros