

**“The Kingdom of Heaven is like....”**

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First Presbyterian Church  
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**New Testament Lesson: Matthew 20:1-16  
Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14**

The parable of the landowner and the laborers means different things to different people. Most of us know it isn't fair for the guy who worked one hour to be paid the same as someone who worked all day. And of course, the message is that God's grace is freely given, as it pleases the Lord, and not as it might please – or displease – us!

But there's another way to look at it. Picture yourself as a day laborer in a country where work is so scarce that people go weeks at a time without being hired. There, your job is to find work. You work all day at looking for work, and on days when you find it, at the end of the day, you get paid. And on days when you don't find work, even as hard as you've tried, you go home with no pay, no money to buy food for your family. Whether or not you believe such condition exist in this world of ours, at the time of Matthew, that's what was happening.

So the people listening to Jesus tell this parable would have rejoiced when the last guy to be hired got a full day's pay. It's not something we can relate to, but they would have rejoiced. And not because the guy got to hang out in the marketplace all day – – which if you think about it isn't much fun when you have no money, no work and a family to feed at the end of the day. No, they rejoiced because the guy got paid for the day and could feed his family. It's a different mindset than we can imagine. But in Matthew's day, they understood that “the people looking for work and who have been waiting for work need a day's pay to survive.”<sup>1</sup>

The meaning of the parable shifts for us if we can bring ourselves to look at it from that perspective, which is more true to Biblical times, as noted by Justo Gonzales in his book title “Santa Biblia.” Seen through such compassionate eyes, such Christlike eyes, this parable is no longer a parable just about God's grace, but it's a parable about real people – about us – about how you and I respond to God's grace in the face of what we know to be fair and square.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that the first laborers hired grumbled against the landowner who hired them. And look why they're grumbling; they're grumbling because everyone who showed up looking for work that morning got paid, whether they found work right off or not. They grumble even though Jesus says this is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

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<sup>1</sup> Justo Gonzales, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 62-63.

They grumble because (quote), “they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it,” they said to the landowner, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us.” So, they grumbled. There are two things going on here. First, the grumblers get their hopes up based on misguided expectations. When they see the latecomers get a full day’s pay, they expect to get paid even more than what was agreed upon.

What was good and fair at the start of the day is all of a sudden spoiled for them – it’s not enough; they won’t be happy with it; they let expectations get the better of them. That’s the first thing going on here. Then, after getting themselves all upset, they have to go and get the landowner all upset. “...You have made them equal to us ...,” they complain. To which the landowner replies, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong.”

Now it may sound to us like the landowner has not been sucked into their upset and anger, since he calls them “friend.” But actually, the term “friend” as used here in Matthew is interpreted more like “mister,” as in “listen here, mister.” It’s a word that puts distance between the landowner and the laborers who were lucky enough to get work right off the bat. Do you see how things have been turned all upside down and backwards because of how they respond to the latecomer’s good fortune?

The same goes for us. We put distance between ourselves and other people by wanting and expecting more for us when more often than not that means less for someone else. Or visa versa, we see someone else getting more than us and feel like we’ve been cheated out of our fair share. That’s just the world we live in, in society. But in the church, in the community of faith, when we’re living as God intended, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as Christians, in that world, things are supposed to work differently, more like the kingdom of heaven as Jesus describes it.

In the Christian community we are supposed to actually be happy for other people, even when it seems by comparison, they’ve gotten the better deal. Does that sound like you, like your family, your workplace or school, or even this church? I know I struggle with this; I have to work at practicing more selfless responses to life’s disappointments. Church can be a place where we practice responding more selflessly to one another.

I can remember in seminary seeing this among my fellow students. Not that we were saints. No, I think it was just that we tried harder to create a counterculture community, a Christian community where we practiced being more selfless in relation to one another. And the truth is, it was easier to do that in seminary than it is in the “real” world. And not that the real world didn’t push its way in all the time; it did. But at least there seemed to be more pockets of altruistic, selfless love and joy for one another. ... That’s it – I’m going back to seminary. I’ll see you later. No. I can’t do that, and I wouldn’t do that, and I’m not called to do that.

What I am called to do – what we are each called to do – is to create that type of a **kingdom-of-heaven community** right here, right here in church, right here in our families, right here in our workplaces and schools, right here in our

neighborhoods. And to do that, is not easy. It takes practice. It took practice when I was in seminary and it takes practice today.

Here are three things we can all do to become more selfless in our attitudes and actions. And none of them involve taking more work or doing more service. Rather, this is about our attitudes in the things we are already doing.

No. 1) Have a selfless mindset. Think about how other people feel. We can do this by looking beyond our own concerns and empathizing with others, even those you've never met – like a poor, disenfranchised day laborer. To do this in your day-to-day life, practice listening when other people are talking. Really listening, instead of letting your mind wander. Imagine yourself facing the other person's struggles. Or practice taking pleasure in other people's happiness – say it even if you don't entirely feel it: "I'm really happy for you." It's called acting your way into right thinking.

No. 2) Make selfless choices. Never hurt someone else to get ahead, whether it's taking the biggest piece of cake or something more drastic like taking away someone else's boyfriend or girlfriend – you get the idea. Resist the temptation to cheat, steal or fudge on the truth. Make selfless choices.

No. 3) Take selfless actions, such as giving up your seat to someone who's just come in, or letting others go first through the door or into the elevator. Have a selfless mindset, make selfless choices, take selfless actions.

To help us remember to respond more selflessly in life – to catch ourselves being self-centered – remember, this is not about you and me and how we do things, but rather it's about God and how God would have each of us do things, how God would have us live, together in community, in Christ. In the end, everyone is better served when we work a little bit at being more selfless toward one another.

How much better it would be if the next time you or I catch ourselves being self-centered – by belittling someone else's problems compared to our own, taking the best for ourselves, or going first ahead of others – how much better it would be if we stopped, and made a conscious choice to respond more selflessly.

***That is what the kingdom of heaven looks like***, says Jesus. It looks like selfless attitudes, selfless choices, and selfless actions in our relationships with one another. Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

O God, we praise you for having bound humanity in a great unity of life, so that each must lean on the strength of all, and depend for comfort and safety on the help and labor of our brothers and sisters.

We ask your blessing on all the men and women who have worked to build and warm our homes, to fashion our clothing and to harvest from sea and land the food that nourishes us and our children.

We pray that they may have health and joy, and hope and love, even as we desire these for our loved ones.

Grant us wisdom to deal justly with every man and woman whom we face in the business of life.

May we not unknowingly inflict suffering through selfish indifference or willful ignorance.

All this we pray in the powerful name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who brings us into community with one another, and who has taught us to pray with one voice, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**