

AN ECONOMY OF GRACE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 20:1-16

I want to begin today by telling you a preacher story. Preacher stories are not about preachers (usually), but instead they are the stories that preachers like to tell in their sermons to get a point across. Preacher stories are not known for their subtlety. Today, I'm going to start off with a preacher story.

There was this man who walked into a neighborhood on the first Monday of the month and he stopped at the first house on the street.

He knocked at the door and explained to the homeowner, "I've come into some money, and I want to share my good fortune. I'd like to give you \$100 if that's okay?"

"Okay?!! Yes, it is okay!" the flabbergasted homeowner exclaimed. Then the mysterious man handed over a crisp \$100 bill and walked away.

The next week, the same man appeared again and the homeowner once again received a new \$100 bill. Each Monday that month the man with the money knocked at the door and the delighted and overjoyed homeowner received a crisp, brand-new Benjamin.

Then, on the first Monday of the *next* month, the mysterious philanthropist walked down the sidewalk and passed by the first home and went instead to the door of the *second* home on the street.

"Hey!" yelled the homeowner of the first house, "Where's my money?"

I warned you, it's not subtle.

This story (obviously) is about how we view fairness, or at least what seems to be unfair to the man who is not getting his \$100 anymore. We get it. We understand why the man yells, "Hey, where's my money?" But it's not his money. It was a gift—free and unexpected and unearned. And now that the money appears to be going to his neighbor, he's not happy about it.

Theologically, we would say that for the first month, what the man experienced was grace—unearned and undeserved—a gift from someone knocking at his door. It is this same grace that is the subject of our reading for today from the Gospel According to Matthew.

this reading is a parable told by Jesus. It begins with these words, *For the kingdom of heaven is like...* Right off the bat, the purpose of this parable is revealed—it is to help us gain a better understanding of the kingdom of heaven.

This parable tells us, *The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.* Now, the kingdom is not like the landowner. But the kingdom is like this particular moment in time—the juncture of the moment a landowner hires day laborers. He goes to the market where the men looking for work have gathered. The landowner contracts with the workers that he will pay them the normal, daily wage. He then sends them out to work in his vineyard.

Later in the morning, around nine o'clock, this same landowner goes back to the marketplace and notices more workers there *standing idle*. He goes out to them and says, *I will hire you and I will pay you whatever is right.* The implication is that they will be paid for the hours they work. It seems fair. The workers agree and go out to the vineyard. And then at noon and then also at three o'clock, the landowner does the same thing and sends more workers into his vineyard.

Then at five o'clock—nearly the end of the workday—he goes out and finds yet more workers. He asks them, *Why are you standing here idle all day?* And they tell him, *Because no one has hired us.* He sends them into the vineyard without any discussion of pay.

At the end of the workday, the owner gathers all those that he has hired. He instructs his manager to pay the workers. But he also tells the manager to pay first the men who were hired last. The manager gathers the five o'clock crowd—the ones who only worked an hour or two at most and pays them. He gives them a full day's wage despite their only working a fraction of the day.

He calls the three o'clock group and they figure they will be paid more because they have worked longer than the five o'clock group. But no. They get the same amount of money, but still more than they expected. This pattern is repeated for those hired at noon and for those at nine o'clock as well.

Then, when the first group arrives—the ones who put in a full day's work—and they figured that they've got a windfall coming because they worked the longest. But no. They are paid the same as everyone else—a day's wage. And when they receive their money, they complain saying, *Those who came 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.*

The landowner responds to one of the complainers saying, *Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take your pay*

and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.¹ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?

Jesus concludes the parable saying, *So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*

In that preacher story I started with, the man in the first house is upset when he doesn't get his free money. In the parable, the early workers gripe when they are paid the same as everyone else even though they do receive what was owed to them, what they had agreed on. They're not short-changed. It just didn't seem fair that the less deserving would be paid the same.

Jesus uses this parable to describe one extraordinary characteristic of the kingdom of heaven, and that is grace. The kingdom is the embodiment of God's grace. Those who enjoy the benefits of the kingdom do so not because they have earned it, but because God gives it to them.

In this parable, the landowner clearly represents God. And we see this in the words the landowner speaks to the complaining workers when he asks, *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?* God's grace is God's to distribute as God pleases. Against the norms of our world, the last will be first and the first will be last. But even for us as people of faith, we still expect that people should get what they deserve and no more (unless it is us getting more). The first should be first. That is what first means. But the ways of the kingdom are different. The ways of God are based on an economy of grace where the last can find themselves at the front of the line.

If this is how you understand this parable, that is wonderful. Because this is what it says. In the kingdom of heaven, we can expect to be challenged by grace.

However, I would like to invite you to consider this parable from another angle. And so, let's change its audience. Yes, this can be a parable for all people, but I believe that Jesus is speaking to a specific audience—primarily his disciples. Through this section of Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been teaching the twelve the meaning of discipleship. And that is continued in this parable.

The disciples have been with Jesus since the beginning. They set aside their lives and their jobs to follow him. They have worked tirelessly for his ministry. Of all those who know about Jesus, they have the longest tenure; they have put in the hours; they should be first. Just before we read this parable, Peter has reminded Jesus, *We have left everything and followed you.*

¹ This verse is from the NIV.

In this parable, however, Jesus appears to be telling the twelve that while they are first, in the kingdom the first will be the last. Not what they want to hear. And they disagree. After all, aren't they ones *who have worked the hardest in the scorching heat*. How can others who come after them reap the same benefits of the kingdom, if not more? That's not fair. They are the special ones. They deserve the greatest reward.

In this parable, what I find the most interesting is the complaint brought by the workers. Their concern not that the others were paid the same amount as them, but that they might be regarded as equals. They say, *These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us*. Yes, equal. That is the complaint of people of faith who operate within the ways of this world. If I am faithful, then I should be lifted up and rewarded for my work above those who are 'less' faithful. The truly faithful are first. For those who consider themselves 'first,' equality is the last thing they might desire.

This parable is relevant for other believers besides the disciples. Matthew wrote this gospel account for his congregation which was made up primarily of people who were Jewish. They were converts to Christianity. And you could be sure that they felt a connection to Jesus through their shared ancestry. I imagine there were grumblings among that church about those non-Jews—those interlopers—coming in and usurping their faith. Jews had been Jews for thousands of years, and these Gentiles were laying claim to the Jewish promise of God's salvation. They are not the Chosen people.

The parable of the kingdom is a pointed reminder to the disciples, to Matthew's congregation, and even us today, that God's promises are meant to be open to all. In the kingdom, all are first, and those who demand to be at the front of the line will find themselves at the back.

In the parable, the final words of the landowner are a question. He asks the early workers, the ones who had been grumbling, *Are you envious because I am generous?* What an amazing question. The landowner is asking if his extreme generosity is a cause for their envy? Think about your own experience. Can you recall a time when someone's generosity made you envious, when you thought, 'I should be getting more of what they are giving away?'

The translation of this question that we find in our English Bibles is rather weak. Most Bibles use the word *envious* to describe what is actually the Greek phrase "evil eye." Instead of "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" the question should be read, *Are you looking with an evil eye because I am good?* Sometimes true generosity directed at others brings up something evil from deep within us. When we witness others receiving something that we feel they don't deserve, we respond with a dark contempt that rises up out of us like bile. It is an evil that declares that we are better than them and that we deserve more than they do. Our instinct is to

do whatever we can to deny this generosity from reaching others. We construct fences and walls to separate them from the source of generosity and grace.

Jesus closes this parable with the words that perfectly frame the parable's message. He says, *The last will be first, and the first will be last.* To grasp the power of this statement, we must accept who is last and who is claiming to be first. The first are those who feel they are deserving because of who they are and what they have done, those who feel they should get more and who are resentful of those who get too much. They are like James and John who feel they deserve to be first with Jesus.

But in the kingdom of heaven, it is the last who are first.

The last are not those who are the least.

The last are those who put others first.

The last are those whose hearts are governed by generosity.

The last are those who exemplify compassion.

The last are those who embody forgiveness.

The last are those who applaud God's grace.

The last are those who lift up the fallen.

The last are those who love.

The last are first in the kingdom.

Let us be last.