

Receiving What is Given
Matthew 16:1-20

Jesus draws our attention today to two groups of people: the first and the last. So, I think that should be our focus today as well, looking at the first and the last in this parable. Before we do, we need to look at why Jesus is telling this story in the first place. Chapter markers are very helpful in navigating the bible but sometimes they disrupt a story unnecessarily. That is the case for us today. In the chapter preceding our parable Jesus speaks with a young rich man and this young rich man wants to know how he can inherit the kingdom of God. "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus response is simple, "follow the commandments." The young man replies, "Okay, I've done that. What else?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The young man left dismayed because he had a lot of stuff and probably had a hard time thinking that he'd have to give it all up. The disciples are watching all of this unfold and Peter boldly steps up to address Jesus. "We've given up everything we have to follow you, Jesus. What will be given to us?" Jesus promises them that in eternity they would sit in judgement over the twelve tribes of Israel. They will be in a prominent position in his coming kingdom. They will be great. Jesus ends with this memorable phrase, "but many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Our reading begins with the greek word *gar*, which implies the following teaching is based on the previous interaction. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a house. Jesus tells them, "To further the point, to teach you about how I operate, here's a parable about master and his vineyard." We just read it so you know the story. It is time to harvest so this master looks to hire help in his vineyard. Workers are hired at 6am with the promise of a day's wage at the end of their twelve hour shift. The master goes on to hire more workers for his vineyard at 9am, 12pm, 3pm, and finally at the eleventh hour, he hires more workers at 5pm. We could look at each group along the way and decipher what they could represent for us today but I'd prefer to focus on the first and the last. I'd like to look at the people who have been working all day in the hot sun for this master and those who showed up at the last minute. When it's time to pay these laborers at the end of the day they line up to receive what they are owed. The master starts with the late comers, those who only worked an hour. He gives them a denarius, a whole day's pay, as if they've worked twelve hours like the first. As the master goes down the line, the payments remain the same. At this point, the eyes of the first workers, the hardest working must be getting pretty large. If these guys are paid a day's wage then for sure we are getting much more. Instead what comes is what should have been expected: a day's wage.

If the interpretation of this parable isn't obvious, here is the point. Jesus is the master and he gives out his love and mercy to whoever he wants. It is his gift to give. This isn't about salvation or forgiveness because we don't work for those things, Jesus did that on the cross. This is about his good gifts of grace and mercy. We in the church are the laborers. Some of us have been around a long time and some are fairly new to the faith. We each respond to the master's call and receive his gifts. Now, we tend to think a lot about the master in this parable because we like to focus on the gift but maybe we can turn our attention to the workers. Consider the mindset of the first and the last in this parable. The first workers are last to be paid. The last workers are first to be paid. What did they think about themselves? What did they think about each other? I'd like to address both groups today because I think we have representatives from each group scattered amongst our attendees today or those who watch this service online. We have members who have been around a long time. We have people who have practically been Lutheran Christians since birth. We also have those who are new to the faith. We have those who are new to how church operates. They have returned to church after a long hiatus. We have infant Christians as well and this isn't just a reference to age, it's a reference to experience.

Neither group is despised or rejected. Neither group is elevated or praised. They all receive what is due. They all receive what the master is willing to give. They all receive the gifts. And that is true of all of us here. No matter how long we've been here. No matter how many hours we've put into the church: cleaning and decorating and tithing. No matter our credentials or work efforts, we all gather to receive God's good gifts. Praise be to God for that. But this parable has another aspect to it that I need to explore. There is something else to be reflected on and it isn't the master, it is the condition of the hearts of the laborers. I don't mean to be overly tough with you but there are questions that each group of laborers needs to answer. But remember: we are all in the vineyard. We are all present together here doing the Lord's work. There isn't fear of exclusion or being cast out. We know his gifts. We receive his gifts. But when we look down the pew or across the sanctuary at other laborers what are we thinking? When we consider the work of our own hands, how do we think of those who came at the eleventh hour? When we are the ones who show up late to the party, what do we think of those who have been sweating in the sun all day? Where are our hearts as we receive what is given?

First, I'd like to address the late comers. I want to talk to those who became Christians late in life, those who began to take faith seriously after a long life of not. I want to ask a direct question of those who were finally found at the eleventh hour and listened to the call of the master. What took you so long? Don't get me wrong. I am so thankful you are here. Scripture tells us over and over again how we are to rejoice at those who were lost and now found. We welcome you with open arms and are so excited that you are here with us, in whatever capacity that is. But what took you so long? The parable says that these laborers were the ones milling about in the marketplace. They probably woke up late. They probably took their time getting themselves ready to go. They let a lot of things distract them before they finally stepped out to be seen and invited to work. The good thing is that they came. The good news is that they received an unjust reward. The last were first, but what took them so long? I wonder if they knew what was waiting for them if they would have come running. You late comers. Did you know how good the master is? Did you refuse to see the goodness of what he offers? Were you chased off by the wee hour workers? The past is the past. Now is what matters. I'm so glad you are here now. I'm so glad you rest securely in the arms of Almighty God now. But I wonder if you knew then what you know now, would you have come sooner?

The group we might be more familiar with is those who have been working and sweating all day. You are in that group if you were born into the faith. You are in the group if you used to teach Sunday School years ago. You are in the group if you've been a member longer than the pastor has been alive. You are the first laborers and when it is your time to receive God's gifts you get exactly what the new guys get. I want you early risers to search your hearts and answer this question honestly. Does God's grace ever make you mad? Does God's grace ever fill you with rage or jealousy? Do you look down the line at those who haven't done the work, haven't been around, haven't committed themselves like you have and think that you are being short changed? Does a deathbed conversion frustrate you? They got to do whatever they wanted in life and they still can turn their lives around the last minute and receive what I have been working for my whole life? No, that's not fair. What is the condition of your heart? What emotions swell up inside of you when you see that denarius handed over to the eleventh hour worker with barely a drop of sweat on their brow? Do we rejoice at their inclusion or are we salty that they get the same gifts we do?

The first shall be last and the last shall be first. We can gladly accept that premise when we consider the persecution Christians face in the world. We can embrace that truth when we hear God's call to servanthood because we know that one day we will be at the front of the line. But what about when it comes to God's love and mercy? The first that came to the vineyard were the last to receive. The last to show up were the first to get their rewards. Maybe this phrase, this teaching of order helps us truly understand the equality of God's kingdom. Maybe it helps us see God's love as a gift equally offered to all. Maybe it shows us in a real and tangible way just how unfair God's grace is when we receive it. All of this is true regardless of how we feel about it. It's hard to rejoice when we feel short changed, but we knew what was

coming to us when we entered the vineyard. It's the master's harvest and it is his wealth. Don't forget your place. Don't forget who owns what.

So regardless of where you fall on the spectrum of workers, embrace the reality of God's equally unfair grace. His affection is given to all. His love, a gift waiting for all to receive regardless of how sweaty or tired they are. Just open your hand and receive what is given. Rejoice in what you hold in your hands, what you feel in your heart. Be exponentially glad that others can experience that too. Our God has plenty to give and he recklessly hands it out to people who don't deserve anything and those of us who arrogantly feel we deserve everything. Check your heart. Recognize where you have sinned in this great exchange and stand with hands open ready to receive forgiveness again. The master is eager to give it. He's eager to show you how great his love is for you. He's eager to show that all your toil and labor wasn't meaningless. He wants to show us Jesus, the greatest sign of love and mercy poured out from the veins of the son of God. Receive what you are given. To those who are new: you belong in this great line of workers. Receive the gifts of God with joy. To those who have been here since the beginning: let the master determine the worth of all standing shoulder to shoulder with you. Receive his gifts with humble joy, recognizing the great cost to the master instead of your own works. In Jesus' name. Amen.