

GOD'S LOVE FOR NEWCOMERS¹

I've got to say that this does seem unfair. My first reaction is to sympathize with the all day long laborers who indeed bore the day's burden and the heat of the sun, who did twelve times the work as those last hired and who worked for one solitary hour. Biblical scholars tell us that there were smaller coins than a denarius which would have enabled the land owner to have prorated the workers pay. This doesn't happen. What does happen feels like a mix of insensitivity and soft-headed soft-heartedness.

It helps to review the labor practices of the day, practices that are pretty typical for agricultural workers even today. Early in the morning common laborers would gather at an appointed place ready for work. Land owners would come and hire as many of the gathered crowd as they thought they needed. They would negotiate a wage for the day's work. And off to work those workers would go. After the land owners had hired the workers they needed, there were often left-over laborers who would simply have to stand.

It appears that the landowner in Jesus' story today had underestimated the amount of workers to finish whatever he wanted to accomplish. Maybe the owner was trying to finish

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harvesting before a frost or something like that. Every couple of hours he had to return to the marketplace and pick up additional workers. Significantly, we read that towards the end of the day, the foreman asks the idle workers why they are still there. They reply that no one has hired them. This detail is significant. It appears that they have been waiting for work all day long. They have been willing, so willing that they have not given up even an hour before quitting time. Fortunately, they too are given an hour's worth of work.

Now, when I take in the circumstances for hiring agricultural workers together with the surprising distribution of pay at day's end, the story makes a lot more sense. The land owner is certainly not cheating anyone. The all-day workers get what they have contracted for. They doubtless considered themselves lucky to have been selected in the early morning. And the latecomers are compensated in a way that allows them to feed their families that day. They had been willing to work all day.

Suddenly, this situation doesn't look to me so unfair or bizarre. The land-owner appears to have a tender heart for his workers and is re-balancing the scale at the end of the day in favor for those who had not been granted a good start at the beginning of the day.

And this situation, Jesus teaches us, is what the Kingdom of God is like. When God fully reigns and when God's dreams for humanity come fully true, this kind of stuff will be the norm.

I detect in the life of Jesus and throughout the Bible a certain tilt towards the underdog and the poor. Israel itself was a slave group in the huge Egyptian civilization. They didn't have a chance. They were locked out of full participation and fulfilling faithfulness. It was on their side that God intervenes. The prophets cry out on behalf of the poor. Jesus himself is poor and spends time with tax collectors and sinners—the down and out crowd. In Jesus' teaching we see this special allowance for the poor. Blessed are the poor, he says in the Sermon on the Plain.

So often in our experience, life is not fair. Not always, but tragically often. I think of the game monopoly. In the game of Monopoly, the play starts innocently enough. Players roll the dice and move around the board buying pieces of property. Before long, one of the players gains a little toe-hold of advantage. Pretty soon, that player is amassing a little financial empire with properties and houses and hotels, all of which exact more and more rent from the other players. As the game moves to its conclusion it becomes obvious who is going to win. The other players cling to a few dollars and deeply

mortgaged properties. They creep around the board doing anything possible to avoid being wiped out by the one grand land owner who dominates the board. Unlike other games like basketball or baseball where the playing field never favors one player or the other, Monopoly moves from being an evenly matched game to a grossly lopsided struggle where one player becomes so entrenched and so powerful that his opponents come to strive for bare survival.

Transfer this to real life. When we were in Africa last year we met a young man named Afiki. Afiki worked the desk at the guest house where we stayed. He carried our luggage and showed us around. On the night before we flew home, Afiki made a little appointment with me to talk about something important. Kristen knew what was coming and rightly warned that he was going to ask for money. She was right. Afiki told me that he wanted to go to agricultural school—a project that would cost several hundred dollars. I asked him if he had thought of working and saving himself—to which he replied that he worked two jobs day and night and was saving everything he could. How much had he saved? Twelve dollars.

Living in Malawi and in many places in this world is like being in the losers group in Monopoly. The only way to have a better life is for a generous person simply to give it to you.

From Jesus you and I get a story that gives us a glimpse of that generosity. There is a Kingdom, a realm, a new regime of love coming into the world, where the latecomers and losers in life's game get their chance.

And I believe that Jesus isn't just talking about money. How about faith and our standing with God? When Matthew wrote his gospel some of the people coming to Christ and faith were life-long Jews who had obeyed the Torah (the Law) and who had been in the synagogue from infancy. Others were days away from being outright pagans. They came to faith knowing next to nothing about God. Think how the old-timers felt about the unwashed pagans, together with notorious sinners, who felt they had a fresh start with Jesus.

This parable challenges all church congregations, including us. Sometimes church congregations operate on a seniority system that locks out newcomers. Unless you've been a member for 20 years and are preferably the child of members you can't even pass out bulletins much less serve on the session. Whenever a newcomer comes to our congregation who displays the spiritual gifts of leadership and is nominated for our session or Board of Deacons, I think of this parable. Seniority is not a strong value where Christ reigns.

As I was working on this sermon it struck me that I myself have been welcomed into Christ's Church and the Presbyterian Church when I didn't necessarily have any connections or clout, I hadn't paid my dues, my parents hadn't started a family legacy. Instead, Christ's church opened its arms and doors and after a scant seven years from the time I joined the Presbyterian Church, I became one of her ministers. Thank God, for his wonderful welcome to me—a latecomer.

I believe that you and I will have heard this parable about the Kingdom in exactly the correct way when we let the welcome and generosity of the Kingdom flow through us. We know those in life who have started life disadvantaged, delayed. Share with them an extra little lift. And let's not buy into the Monopoly mentality that let's some be big winners while others creep through just able to survive.

Maybe as I've talked you too are beginning to think, "I'm a Christian not because I'm an insider with all the right connections. I'm a Christian because of the generosity of Jesus Christ who has always given beyond expectation. Maybe in the end we too are those who have put in one late hour, and by grace have been given the whole wage.