“That’s Not Fair!”

Matthew 20:1-16

Rev. Rebecca Weaver Longino

First Presbyterian Church, Luling, TX

March 1, 2015

A few years ago, a friend and I decided to attend a SXSW event. She convinced me that the Rachel Ray party would be worth it. Even though I wasn’t a fan of going to events with no guaranteed entry. She talked up the free food and drinks and stellar lineup of music. Evidently it was one of the hottest events at SXSW. We did our research and found out that people line up early in the morning to ensure entry to Stubbs BBQ by 10am. We knew there was a capacity limit, so we wanted to make sure we got in. We debated on what time to get there, and decided on 7am. 3 hours before the doors would open. Surely we’d be some of the first people in line at that early hour. Well, we were shocked when we showed up and saw hundreds of people in line already. Some of them had been there overnight! We walked from the entrance to the end of the line, about 2 blocks down the street. Settling in to our place in line, we started our wait.

For 3 hours we stood on the street, anticipating how great the day would be. We made some friends with the people around us and got out our umbrellas when it started to rain. This waiting part was actually sort of fun and we relished the reward of entry when the line started to move toward the door. Shortly after 10am, we got in and started our long day of festivities and fun.

As the party ended, I ran into a friend who looked way more energized than I felt. It turns out, she and her friends showed up at 3pm, just in time for the last two, and best, bands of the day played. They got right in since there was no line. And they got to enjoy the same free food and drinks that we did. And they got to see the musicians they wanted to see.

I started to rethink my experience of that day. It rained off and on, creating a layer of mud on the ground, leaving us with nowhere to sit. The bands for the first half of the day were, well, not so good. If we wanted food or use of the restroom, it meant an hour of waiting in line.

Suddenly my attitude toward the day soured. I became bitter about showing up so early. Standing in the rain all day. Waiting in lines for 80% of the time. Listening to bands that I didn’t enjoy.

Finding out that this friend got to enjoy the best parts after showing up later in the day made me resentful. “That’s not fair!” I thought. Those of us who have been here since dawn should have been the only ones allowed in! We worked hard for this privilege.

I could relate to those laborers who worked all day and got paid the same as those who showed up at 5pm.

In this parable about the vineyard, Jesus reveals a truth about the kingdom of heaven. This truth challenges our notions of fairness and justice.

We are told about a landowner who goes to the market in search of laborers. This is similar to scenes outside The Home Depot in bigger cities, where laborers will wait in hopes of getting picked up for work. Back in Jesus’ day, there were no temp agencies to connect people to work. They simply had to show up on the street and hope to be selected for a job.

The first important detail to notice in this story, is that the landowner went to find workers. This is rather odd. He has a manager who should be doing this. The landowner wouldn’t typically have anything to do with hiring laborers. He should be spending his day idly in his villa, reaping the benefits of his wealth. It is peculiar that the owner chooses to go do this task himself.

The second important detail to notice is that he returns to the market several times that day in search of more workers. Surely he could have selected enough workers on the first go. Decided how many to hire and only have to make one trip to the market. But he makes several trips out there. First at dawn, then 9, noon, 3 and finally 5 in the evening. Each time he finds more workers and hires them. Was this because there was more work to be done as the day wore on? Or was the landowner more concerned about making sure these laborers were given work and pay? We can’t be sure from Jesus’ telling of the story.

The third important detail to notice is the laborers themselves. We might speculate that the ones chosen at 3 or 5pm were lazy and slept in. That they missed their opportunity to be selected for work. Perhaps they just weren’t good workers. They were the kids who got picked last in gym class because they weren’t as good as the others.

But the landowner asks them why they have been idle out there all day. They too showed up early and were available. They wanted to work. But they were not given the opportunity to work. It isn’t that they are lazy, or incompetent. There just wasn’t work for them to do. They persevered and waiting all the way until evening, still hoping someone would hire them.

So, we’ve got this landowner who personally seeks out workers for his vineyard. He goes out multiple times in the day, searching for more laborers, without indication that there is an actual need for them. And these workers wait all day, hoping someone will reach out to them. The landowner hires each of them, and pays them all the same wage as those he hired in the morning.

This, according to Jesus is what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like.

We are told that God is like the landowner, personally going out to find those in need. Not just once, first thing in the morning, but several times. God’s invitation into the kingdom isn’t limited to those who are found early. God will persevere and seek out all who are in need of love and care and a place to belong. And in the end, the reward for each person is the same as everyone else, regardless of when they brought into the kingdom.

This illustrates how God orders life – that all are equal and given equal reward no matter when they come into faith. There’s no special prize for coming to the faith early. All are given an equal reward.

This certainly reverses our notion of social order and what we believe to be fair. It challenges our notions of justice and righteousness. If it were up to us, the workers in the vineyard would earn pay based on how long they worked. But God’s economy is radically different. There’s no sense of hierarchy in the kingdom of God. All are considered equal.

Where do we see ourselves in this story? Are we like the workers who get hired first thing in the morning? Lifelong Presbyterians, or Christians, who have been in God’s family from the start? What happens when we see others who arrive to the faith later in life? Do we resent them for reaping the same reward as us?

Or, are we like the workers hired later in the day? Coming to faith as adults, much later in life? Do we feel intimidated by those who know their Bible better than we do, or know more hymns than we do? Do those who arrive later really feel welcomed by those who have been here all along?

We can look at this on a grand scale, thinking about whether or not it matters when we come to faith. This parable leads us to understand that it doesn’t matter to God. Whenever a person arrives and discovers a life in Christ, they will be welcomed as equals. Are we doing the same? Making new Christians feel welcome and loved?

We can look at this on a smaller scale, right here in this church. Are those who have been members for decades considered equals to those who are new members? Do we treat everyone the same, or is there a hierarchy based on who has been here longer?

I recall seeing this dynamic in my church youth group as a child. My family joined the Presbyterian Church when I was in second grade. By some standards, that makes me a lifelong Presbyterian. But I had peers who were baptized as babies in the church. I remember feeling like those who had been there longer were given more honor and credit. But then I remember myself feeling superior to those who joined the church when they were in middle school or high school. I was caught in the middle between feeling like I hadn’t been there long enough, all the while, looking down on those who had joined later than I had. I felt like a laborer who got hired at noon.

This weird dynamic is a very human in nature. But as our parable for today shows us, God doesn’t operate on a system of hierarchy. God doesn’t see those who are brought into the faith early as more special or important than those who arrive later. The timing of it all doesn’t matter.

What does matter is that we all get there eventually. That God is the one who seeks us out, and invites us into the kingdom. Whenever we arrive, we are given the reward of life in Christ. We are given a place in the kingdom where all are equally loved and valued. This is the gospel message that Jesus tells us in this parable. This is the good news, that even when the world tries to remind us of our place in line, we aren’t ranked in God’s eyes. We are all precious and loved, equal to everyone else. Thanks be to God.