

The Laborers in the Vineyard (Parables 5)

Matthew 20:1-16

November 3, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

We just experienced our first Halloween in La Grange. Halloween becomes a longer and longer celebration every year, it seems to me. It kicked off last Sunday afternoon, with a Trunk or Treat Fall Festival party thing at Andy's church. There were games to play and crafts to make. One of our children participated enthusiastically, stayed for the whole time, and came home with a whole lot of candy in her bag and more candy than I want to know about in her tummy. The other picked up a small handful of candy from the tables and was ready to come home pretty much as soon as we got there. Following that, Halloween laid low until Thursday, the day of. Each child got a piece of candy from her teacher at the end of the day.

Then, a new thing for us: trick-or-treating at the courthouse square. However long it's been going on, I think a Presbyterian may have organized it in the first place. Everyone goes the same direction around the square, counter-clockwise, stopping at businesses along the way, who are handing out generous handfuls of candy and other treats. Well, except for the dentist, who was handing out toothbrushes. Some people in our party were offended at that. As this activity didn't require a whole lot of interaction, both of our children ended up with plenty of candy in her bucket.

And then we got home. They surprise me every year, because they never compare who got what, or do any trading of candy. I think there may be some straight-up theft when no one is looking, but they really don't complain or even seem to notice if their sister got more or better candy. This is in sharp contrast to me and my brother when we were little. We would line our candy up by type, count it, proclaim a great injustice in the universe if it didn't come out even, and start bargaining with each other to make things equal.

They elected not to go back out in the neighborhood later, and we had zero trick-or-treaters come to our door, which is also completely different for us. So we ended up with two buckets more-or-less full of candy, plus the big blue bowl that we had ready for our nonexistent visitors. There's more than enough candy for everyone. We established several years ago that all Butterfingers go to mom, and once that happened, everyone was happy. No lining up. No counting. No coveting. Strange children at my house.

The laborers in the vineyard were not so content with their buckets of candy, so to speak. And it is completely understandable why they aren't. Let's back up. This isn't as familiar a parable as the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan. It does share a theme with the Prodigal Son, though, so keep that in mind. This parable only appears in Matthew, so we don't have another gospel's version to compare it with.

A vineyard owner goes to the day laborers site to hire some workers for the harvest. He hires some first thing in the morning and agrees to pay them the usual daily wage, let's use some round numbers and say they make \$10 an hour, and they're working for 12 hours, so they will receive \$120 at quitting time. The owner goes back at 9:00 and hires some more workers. The same at noon. And then some more at 3:00. Finally, some more just an hour before quitting time, at 5:00. Each time, he offers to pay them what is "right."

What kind of incompetent vineyard owner is this, who doesn't know how much labor he needs at the beginning of the day? Why is he wasting so much time returning four times to get some more laborers? They were almost certainly walking to his vineyard, so it's not like he couldn't fit them all in his van to start with. As Amy-Jill Levine says, maybe he has "another agenda."¹

So, if the normal rules of the workplace applied, the workers hired at 6:00 in the morning would get their \$120. The workers hired at 9:00 would get \$90, for 9 hours of work. Those who came at noon would get \$60, the 3:00 arrivals would get \$30, and those that were hired last would get \$10. That seems fair, right?

That is not at all what happened. Instead, when the whistle blows at 6:00 in the evening, the workers all sit down, the vineyard owner is there, and his manager—who normally would have done the hiring—is also there. The owner directs his manager to pay the last workers first, and to give them the normal daily wage. So they've just made \$120 an hour! All the other workers are seeing this happen, and I can only imagine how quickly they are making calculations in their heads. If this owner is paying \$120 an hour, well then the workers who have been working all day out in the hot sun at hard labor, they're going to make \$1440, which is amazing! But, it quickly becomes obvious that that amount of generosity is not going to happen. The workers that arrived at 3:00 also get \$120. And so do the ones who came at noon, and 9:00. And the ones who have "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" also get \$120, just what the owner had agreed to, twelve long hours before, when he hired them.

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus*, p. 226

Well. This is obviously and clearly and horribly not fair. This is the kid that stayed home getting a full bucket of candy on Halloween. This is not the way things are supposed to work, and there isn't even a cultural gap—we can see their point easily and clearly. People who work longer at the same job should get paid more, it's as simple as that.

The landowner, remember, has a different agenda. "Friend," he says, which sounds nice, but again as Levine points out, the only time "friend" is used in Matthew, it's a little bit sarcastic. Jesus calls Judas "friend" when Judas is about to betray him, for instance.² "Friend, I'm doing you no wrong." The first hired get exactly what they agreed to, and as for the rest, the landowner claims that it is his prerogative to pay what is "right." Even if it doesn't seem to be fair.

Now, this is all very interesting. But let's not lose sight of who is telling this parable: Jesus; and what he says at the beginning: "the kingdom of heaven is like the landowner, who..." In this way it is similar to the pearl of great price parable, where Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to the merchant. And in the way that it points out that the kingdom is not fair, that people get rewards that they don't deserve, it is similar to the parable of the Prodigal Son, with the older brother agreeing heartily with the first hired workers, that the payment arrangement is not fair.

And somehow, someday, the kingdom of heaven is like this. It isn't fair, at least not from the perspective of human justice, from the perspective of the kids counting their Halloween loot. Divine justice in the kingdom is obviously completely different--to stretch the metaphor too far entirely—from the perspective of the person handing out the candy. If the candy hander-outer wants to fill up the bucket, then that is the candy hander-outer's prerogative.

The landowner's agenda seems to be making sure that each of the people, as many as he can hire, will have enough money to feed their families for a few days, that each of the workers will have enough. And he seems to be saying with his "Are you envious that I am generous?" pointed question, he seems to be saying that the all day workers should be happy that their 5:00 co-workers will have enough to live on, as they themselves should be grateful. And who knows what happens the next day: maybe those 5:00 workers are the first hired and it all eventually evens out in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus leaves that to our imagination.

When we lived in Gonzales, our neighbors three doors down were generous people. They shared their pool with everyone in town, it seemed like. They threw

² Levine, p. 232

a huge Easter party each year, with a petting zoo and literally a thousand eggs, and food and fun. They loved Halloween above all, and when we trick-or-treated at their house, everyone was invited inside for hot dogs and cookies and horse troughs of candy. Good candy. Chocolate. Horse troughs of chocolate. And they would say, "oh sweetie, take as much candy as you want." And somehow there was always enough candy for the hundreds of trick-or-treaters that came through their doors each year.

The kingdom of heaven is like home owners that have horse troughs of candy on Halloween. The kingdom of heaven is like the landowner who wastes his time and energy and money paying people for work they didn't do. The kingdom of heaven looks unfair, but is made of generous people doing what is right.