

“The Trouble with Latecomers”

**Matthew 20:1-16**

<sup>20</sup>For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' <sup>7</sup>They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, 'These 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.' <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?' <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

*Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit, open our understanding that we may receive your Word of life. Amen.*

So what's the trouble with latecomers?

Want to start a meeting on time? Latecomers throw a monkey wrench into that plan! Planning a special meal for company to be ready at a certain time? Thanks to latecomers everybody misses the meal's peak of perfection. And under the heading of instant karma, being late for a bus, train or plane has immediate consequences.

In our world – a world that runs on chronological time – it is fairly easy to be a latecomer. I've been a latecomer more times than I care to say; it's embarrassing. But of course there are situations that make being late unavoidable; like being suddenly faced with making a 911 call. Or having to respond to a 911 call!

I don't like being late, and I'm sure people don't like me being late. Being late is not the best way to win a popularity contest. Although some folks can roll with the tardiness saying something like, "Oh well...he or she will probably be late for their own funeral!"

In our parable today we have a variety of latecomers; a few are really late, coming onto the scene at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour...of a 12 hour day! I think it is somewhat amazing that these 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers are included at all. In the *real world*, how much difference could they really make? They barely get started and the day is over; why bother?

But our lesson today transports us into *the world of parable* where things don't always unfold as we might expect, where latecomers are welcomed and have a place in the vineyard...in the kingdom.

The next surprise is that the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers are paid first; why should the latecomers be paid first? And not only are they paid first, but they are paid a whole day's wage for their one hour of labor.

Picture yourself having worked for this landowner the whole day; the full 12 hours. Wouldn't you be feeling bone-tired and way past ready to go home? What would you be thinking as you saw the latecomers walk off with a full day's wage? I would start doing the math, calculating what I might receive; this landowner appears to be very generous.

But then when it's our turn to hold out our hand, we stare in disbelief; we get the same – a day's wage. But we worked *12 times* as much as those *latecomers*. This can't be right! The parable offends our sense of justice and fairness, and we mutter to ourselves, "This can't be right."

Once again, this is the world of parable, and the focus is not on the physical world we know. The focus is on the **kingdom of heaven**; this parable seeks to reveal the nature of the kingdom of heaven: *For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard*. This parable is also timeless because the critique it levels at the way things are in our material world, are as valid today as they were in Jesus' day.

The day's wage, which all the laborers received in this parable, was a symbol for what a family needed to survive; *just survive*; saving, investing, planning for college were clearly not in the picture. Thus in the kingdom of heaven everybody gets what they need to live; everybody!

The other surprising thing is that the latecomers are welcomed in. This may offend our sense of fairness too. The parable suggests that those who come to faith late in life will be just as welcome in the kingdom as the one who walked in faith all their life. (We might want to ask ourselves if walking in faith is labor of racking up credits, or is it pure joy!!)

So...what if the latecomer was a terrible sinner beforehand (you can fill in your own category of sin)? Or what about a death-bed confession; can a person who lived their whole life lost in sin confess at the last minute and be received into the kingdom of heaven? What's fair in the kingdom of heaven?

But when we struggle with the fairness question, do we consider our own sin? I'm a sinner. I *need* God's grace. Do we forget that our membership in the human race means we are not perfect, and thus we are counted in the company of sinners? "Oh, but those white lies, they hardly count. And what's a little gossip among friends?" Do we really want to get into the business of ranking sin? My sense is that sin is like pregnancy; you know...can a woman be *sort of* pregnant!

The parable certainly challenges our sense of fairness. But the good news – if we can hear it – is that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7, 10). In the realm of God, latecomers are celebrated, welcomed with joy, embraced with love. Remember the "prodigal son" who was welcomed home by his father – extravagantly. Yet how often do we play the role of the older brother who refuses to have any part in it; and is not that kind of pride the very visible badge of a sinner?

Today we are honoring our first responders, and I would like to hold them up as an earthly model – a human model – for the extravagant openness of the kingdom of heaven. You see when a 911 call comes in, the dispatcher doesn't ask questions to see if you qualify to be served. He or she does not ask about your race, or skin color, or religion. The dispatcher doesn't ask if the one in need of emergency help is gay or straight, citizen or refugee. To first responders *all lives* are sacred, and their job is to save lives, minimize suffering, and keep people safe. And first responders give their all to do just that.

The Lord is looking for laborers for the vineyard of the kingdom of heaven on earth. According to St. Francis it's not very complicated. For me his poem, "He Asked for Charity" bears repeating, and says it all:

*God came to my house and asked for charity.  
And I fell on my knees and cried,  
"Beloved, what may I give?"  
"Just love," he said,  
"Just love."*

So what is fairness in the kingdom of heaven? Fairness in the kingdom of heaven is measured by love, and love destroys pride and envy, jealousy and keeping score; love destroys the need to pay back every trespass, insult, or injury.

God's love is not conditional. We are all invited to labor in the vineyard of the kingdom of heaven on earth...right now. My sense is, God will be very generous.

Amen!