

And You Think I'M Bad at Math...

GOSPEL MATTHEW 20:1-16

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When 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.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Expectations can be such a problem.

I remember when I first started to take my sense of call seriously. I had just read Marcus Borg’s *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, and after I read it I started at the beginning at read it again. It wasn’t his thinking about Jesus that was so interesting to me- it was the context that he gave about Jesus’ life. He drew from archeologists and from extra-Biblical literature written in the first century to paint this incredibly vivid picture of Jesus’ day. And I was just thunderstruck. Without hospitals or mental hospitals he described the large number of healers wandering around very much like Jesus- guys with these crazy names like Chanina Ben Dosa and Honi the Circle Drawer.

And I think it was the first time that I realized when you talk about Judaism, you can never simply talk about ancient Jews as if they were all one thing. No, you had the regal Saducees who cared for the temple and who didn't believe in resurrection. And you had the dynamic Pharisees who did believe in resurrection and who tried to interpret the law so the common person could follow it. And you had the Essenes, this end of the world sect who lived down on the Dead Sea. It was just incredible. I wanted to know everything I could.

And that was what spurred me to change my major and start studying ancient Greek and Latin and learn as much as I could about the New Testament world. And I was very lucky that at the same time I was becoming voracious about learning about the ancient New Testament world the University of Texas had just hired a new director of the religious studies department- a big time New Testament guy named L. Michael White. Michael was not only a great scholar with impeccable credentials, but he was kind of famous as far as professors go- if you've ever seen the PBS series from Jesus to Christ, Michael is one of the featured speakers in his stylish black mock turtleneck.

So I took everything I could from him. I did my undergrad thesis under him- a riveting study entitled Thaumaturgy and Identity: Luke-Acts and the Ancient Magical Worldview. I was always the kid in the class who had read absolutely everything, did all the homework, was the first to arrive, the last to leave, always had my hand up asking questions that would make me sound intelligent and engaged. I mean I just knocking myself out for this guy.

And then it happened. It finally happened. He, my professor, the director of the religious studies department, invited me to attend a party he was throwing. Me! I can't

tell you how excited I was. He was finally noticing what a great student I was. I was finally making it into his inner circle.

I remember driving out to his home- he has this massive, beautiful home out in the west hills of Austin. And I showed up right on time, and I rang the doorbell, and he answered it, and he beamed and said: “Ken! I’m so glad you made it.” And I was about to say what an honor it was to be invited, when he handed me a bottle opener, you know one of those bottle openers the waiters use with the corkscrew and the lever? He handed it to me and said, “Perfect timing. The guests are going to be arriving in about 30 minutes, a few of the others are in the kitchen, why don’t you go and work on the wine?” Now believe it or not, I was not actually getting what was happening. “A few of the others?” I asked. His beady little eyes narrowed, “Yeah, a few of the other students. I always get students to help out at my parties.” And then the light, the sad little light, finally went on in my head- I wasn’t a guest. I wasn’t joining Michael’s inner circle. I was the help. It was one of the most humiliating nights of my life- not least because I didn’t really know how a waiter’s opener worked. I knew the corkscrew twisted in, but then I didn’t know how to use the lever. And so I literally spent the night putting bottles between my legs and pulling for everything I was worth to get the cork out- it looked awful.

Expectations can be such a problem!

A lot of folks think that’s what going on in the parable Jesus tells this morning.

Now this parable is so great in terms of our ability to understand it. It makes as much sense in our world as it did in his. You have this guy who owns a vineyard, right?

And we have these people- head down to Newberg, Dundee- we've got vineyards all over the place. And it's picking time, see. Only, the weather report is not looking good, and this guy realizes he's going to have to get all of his grapes off the vine as fast as he possibly can. So, he drives his pick up truck downtown early in the morning to where all the day workers are hanging out- we still have those guys, too, don't we? And the guy sees a crowd hanging around and he tells them to jump in the back- he'll pay the standard wage. Happy for the work, they crowd in. Now, the thing is these guys are great, but to get everything in, the owner still needs more. So he keeps heading down to where the day workers are- at noon, at three, even at five. He's got to get these grapes down.

So, so far so good. But then, when night falls and the whistle blows- this is when everything gets interesting. The owner loads up envelopes full of money, and he sends his office manager out there to pay everyone. He tells the office manager to pay the folks who came last first. And so the guys who showed up at five open their envelope- shocked they find an entire denarius in there, a whole day's wage even though they only worked a few hours. The other workers see this and are immediately thrilled. I mean if these guys got a whole denarius for a few hours work, they calculate in their heads- what must THEY be getting for the whole day? But you know what happens- when they open their envelopes they get exactly what they were promised- a denarius. Everyone gets a denarius.

And even though they got exactly what they were promised- they're hacked. And the landowner is hacked that they are hacked, and he tells them to take what they were given and be thankful. He says it's his money and he can spend it how he likes- or are they jealous because he's generous?

So, it's a parable that's easy to understand, but it sure isn't easy to like, is it? It's easy to see it from the perspective of the grumblers, those workers who were there all day long, slaving away in the hot sun. It really doesn't seem fair for the landowner to pay them the same as everyone else even though they did a ton more for him. And yet Jesus doesn't seem bothered by this in the least, does he? What's going on?

Well, the normal way to talk about what the grumbling laborers are doing wrong is to talk about expectations. Folks say the problem with the workers who were there all day is they EXPECTED to get more because they worked harder. And this expectation is based on the wrong belief that God's economy works like ours does- that God loves us as much as we deserve based on our behavior, when the truth is God loves us with a grace that's infinitely more than even the best of us deserve. One commentator writes: "In this parable God rejects presuming on grace, expecting grace. Grace that can be calculated and 'expected' is no longer grace." (p. 394)

Psychologist and Economist Barry Schwarz has written a great book that touches on this called The Paradox of Choice, and one of his main points is that the secret to happiness, THE secret to happiness (are you listening) is lowering our expectations. Because of all the choices we have in life, you and I can always imagine and expect to be more satisfied than is reasonable, and so wind up far less happy than we used to be decades ago- or compared to people in other countries with fewer choices.

He tells an incredibly funny story about trying to buy a pair of jeans. And it had been a while since he had bought a pair of jeans- like decades. And so he goes in and the

guy's like, "What do you want- skinny cut, boot cut; high rise, classic rise, low rise, denim, acid washed, stone washed..." And he goes on and on. And Schwarz just looks at him and says, "I want the kind of jeans you bought when there were no other kinds of jeans." And of course this kid didn't even know such a dark time existed. The funny thing is Schwarz finally bought a pair of jeans, like a day later- and they actually fit better than the ones he had. But he was less happy with them. Why? Because there were so many others to pick from, and his mind created these amazingly high expectations because of all these possibilities. So, even though he did better- he was actually less happy. Happiness is lower expectations he says!

And there's definitely something to this. If the grumblers didn't know what the others made, or even if the others weren't paid first- they wouldn't have had those expectations that drove them crazy.

And in my situation, standing there in Michal White's doorway- that moment I realized he really hadn't invited me as a guest. I wasn't angry because I didn't like to help out. I was angry because my expectations were so high, that when they were popped like a soap bubble, what might have been a decent night turned into a terrible one for me.

There's definitely something dangerous about expectations. But do you know, this week I found myself thinking there's something else going on, too. I found myself wondering if the chief problem with the grumblers really IS an expectations problem. I found myself wondering if the chief problem is really more about how they viewed their co-workers. I've read this parable SO many times, but this week one word kept jumping out at me: it was the word 'equal'. The grumblers are mad because they wind up feeling

equal with the others. The grumblers never actually complain to their boss about the money. They never say they are mad because they expected more money. The text reads: “They began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them EQUAL to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’” They don’t actually say that what they’re mad about is the landowner didn’t meet their expectations and give THEM MORE- they’re mad because they feel the landowner gave the same to the others and made them EQUAL. The landowner made them EQUAL to those lazy weasels who slept in that morning and didn’t work as hard as they did. This is what burned them.

The grumblers would have been happy with a single denarius- as long as the rest got less.

Wesley believed this parable was aimed at Jewish Christians who resented Greek Christians being treated as equals.

Believe it or not the Qu’ran actually quotes a version of this story as well- only in the Quran it’s about Jews and Christians needing to make room for the Muslims- same song, second verse.

The root problem isn’t so much expecting, demanding grace from God- but grumbling about everyone else getting it, too.

I wonder if the darkest part of the human heart is our never ending belief that we can make ourselves seem more important, more valued, more loved- if we can someone else feel less important, less valued, less loved.

Do you know, in hindsight I wonder if that wasn't the worst part of my night at Michael White's? It was embarrassing that I had expected to be a guest rather than a servant. But what was sinful, what was truly broken about me, is that I really had seen myself as better, more special, more deserving than the other students back there in the kitchen with me. By reading so much, kissing up so much- I really didn't think I belonged back there with them. I mean really, making ME equal to THEM?

Do you know, midway into the party, after I was doing my ridiculously bad job of opening the wine, I dropped one of the bottles after removing a particularly difficult cork, spilling wine everywhere. And one of my colleagues came over to me and she said, "Um, do you want to know how to actually use that thing?" This was a girl I definitely didn't consider to be the sharpest knife in the drawer. She was often late to class. And almost always unprepared. But I was in no position to argue. "Sure," I said and handed her the corkscrew. And then, very patiently, she showed me how the lever worked. And she didn't make me feel like an idiot, even though she must have thought it. And in that instant the last became first, the first became dead last, and I, the grumbler, became the 11th hour worker, the recipient of grace.

And good news, is when Jesus is close, when Jesus is close by, not only are the last first, and the first last, but first and last...they just don't even have meaning anymore. There's just the cup of love overflowing and being poured out on everyone thirsty enough not to care who else is drinking next to them. **Amen.**