

## **It's Never Too Late**

Matthew 20:1-16

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Today we hear Jesus tell another parable.

Now, you remember:

Parables are dangerous.

They sneak up on us and tell us about ourselves.

They surprise us into seeing how the reign of God  
is different from the way the world works.

And parables always leave us with a challenge  
a challenge that will ask us to choose  
between living within our comfortable point of view  
or living within God's point of view.

In today's parable, Jesus imagines the reign of God like a vineyard

Like all parables, it's a story that challenges the way society works,

It pushes us, as the Aboriginal peoples of Australia put it,  
"to go walkabout" –

to travel away from our comfortable life and points of view  
and into a bit of wilderness where God can reach us.

Like all parables, it's a story we can circumambulate –

that is, it's a story we can "walk around" –  
many different times.

And each time we do so, we will go a bit deeper.

We will see something new  
and learn something new  
about ourselves.

So let's, "go walkabout" this parable!

The first time we consider this parable, it just seems to be a story  
about a man who has a vineyard.

He hires some laborers at the beginning of the day  
and then he hires more at mid-day  
and then he hires more at noon  
and then he hires even more one hour before quitting time.

At the end of the day, the vineyard owner pays everyone the same amount.  
So the ones who work more hours complain.

And the owner says,  
“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?  
Or are you envious because I am generous?”

So what is Jesus telling us about the reign of God?

On one hand, Jesus is telling us  
that God is generous  
and that God values each person equally,  
no matter when he or she came into the vineyard  
No one is worth more than anyone else.

Let's walk around this parable a bit more and ask:

So what is Jesus telling us about ourselves?

If we are honest, we don't like God's generosity.

After all, this is not how the “real” world is.

It is so very hard for us to understand that this is how God works,  
that God does not value persons or time or work  
as the world does,  
or as – if the truth be told –

God does not value persons or time or work  
as we actually do.

God's point of view is so very, very different from our own.

From God's point of view,  
it is never too late!

It is never too late for anyone!

And it's hard to believe that this is the way the reign of God is  
especially if we are the ones who came to the vineyard early  
and have been good and faithful workers for a long time,  
perhaps even our whole lives.

We want to be rewarded fairly for our work.

And we believe we deserve more

because we have worked longer and harder.

We want to say, like the laborers: “This farmer, this God, isn't fair!”

And the minute we say this, we are caught.

Jesus has caught us with this parable,  
because we have fallen

right into the trap of comparing ourselves with others!

We are caught in our envy and righteousness.

Ouch!

“Walking around” this parable, we can see that Jesus catches us in a number of ways.

One way he catches us is in the ways we value ourselves  
by putting others down.

Sometimes we do this blatantly,  
sometimes we do this subtly.

The truth is,

we really do not have an inkling of the inner lives of anyone other than ourselves,  
and we do not know anyone's full history  
and the depth of their pain and suffering.

In all my years of pastoring and walking with people spiritually,  
and in all my years of walking with people psychologically,  
in churches and business offices,  
in prisons and homeless shelters,  
in half-way houses and psychiatric wards,  
in war zones and on street corners,  
in big cities and small rural towns,

I have never, ever met anyone who has done anything for a "bad" reason –  
we all have "good" reasons for what we do  
(even Hitler thought he had a "good reason")

No one gets up in the morning and says,  
"For a bad reason I'm going to . . ."

Everyone is doing the best they can with what they have.

And, as John Wesley would remind us,

everyone is "going on to perfection."

We are all changing, all the time,  
as we grow in the love of God.

So, who we are today  
is not who we will be tomorrow.

We're all in process.

And my process is not better than yours.

It is, simply, different.

So it's not up to any of us

To judge another's life

or faithfulness

or goodness.

Mother Teresa would tell the laborers what she tells us:

"Christ came to be Father's compassion to the world.

Be kind in your actions.

Do not think that you are the only one

who can do efficient work, work worth showing.

This makes you harsh in your judgment of others

who may not have the same talents.

Do your best and trust that others do their best. . . ."

And

"You see, in the end, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway."

The Good News is:  
From God's point of view,  
it is never too late!  
It is never too late for anyone to grow in love – even us!

“Walking around” this parable again,  
there is another way Jesus catches us:

We say we believe that God loves us  
And it turns out, for many of us,  
that we really believe God loves us harshly and punitively,  
even though the Biblical witness  
and Jesus, himself,  
tell us over and over  
that God loves us tenderly.

We are not tender towards ourselves.  
And so, when we love others “as ourselves,”  
we do not love them tenderly, either.

We treat others the same way we believe God treats us:  
judgmentally and punitively  
as if they are never good enough  
and we do this  
because we can't believe  
we are made in God's image  
just as we are  
right now;  
because we can't believe  
we are good enough for God  
just as we are  
right now.

It's not others who don't believe,  
It's us . . .  
we don't believe in the amazing grace and love of God,  
even though we've been going to church for years.

Jesus catches us in our own unbelief  
So, we find ourselves, like the father of the sick child,  
needing to approach Jesus and say,  
“Help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

The Good News is:  
From God's point of view,  
it is never too late!  
It is never too late for anyone to grow in faith – even us!

“Walking around” this parable once more,  
there is at least one more way to look at it;  
there is at least one more way Jesus catches us

(And I'd bet there are many more!):

You see, when I lived in California's wine country,  
I learned that harvesting grapes is not something that can be delayed;  
when the sugar content in the grapes reaches a certain level  
the grapes must be harvested immediately.  
When it's time, it's time, and it has to get done that day.

So, in the parable Jesus tells,  
the vineyard owner has to get going.  
He hires some workers first thing in the morning.  
By mid-morning, things aren't going as fast as he'd hoped,  
so he hires some more people to help out.  
At noon, there's still too much work to get finished by the end of the day,  
so he hires some more people to help.  
As the day is drawing to a close, he knows he has to get his grapes in,  
so he finds some workers who had not been offered work that day  
and he hires them to help with the final push.

Who is more valuable?  
Are the workers who started early in the day and kept working  
more valuable than  
the ones who had not given up looking,  
who had not gone home in despair,  
and who were still there at the employment hall, hoping for work,  
the ones who were still willing and available,  
even at the last minute,  
without even a guarantee of a set amount of pay,  
and who made it possible to get all the grapes picked that day?  
The harvest could not have been done without all of these workers.  
Persistence was needed,  
and so were availability and the willingness to change plans.  
Is any of these workers "better"?  
Is any of these workers more "worthy"?

Once again, Jesus catches us:  
Do we ever think we better or worthier than anyone else?  
By grace we receive invitations from God;  
do we look down on those who have to persist longer,  
who can only hope for acceptance?

As Paul said to the governor in Caesarea,  
"I have a hope in God . . .  
that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous."  
(Acts 24:15).  
According to Paul,  
everyone is included in the reign of God,  
and no one is left out.

This hope was Paul's reason  
for living the way he did and inviting others.

What if Jesus is talking about how we accept God's invitation each day?  
What if he's talking about living in hope,  
ready and willing to say "yes!"  
to whatever God offers,  
and then jumping right in whole-heartedly?  
What if he's talking about living our lives in ways  
that invite and welcome everyone,  
not just some?  
What if he's talking about working side by side  
with strangers, with new people,  
with those who have been left out,  
working together  
on behalf of God's great hopes and possibilities?

The Good News is:  
From God's point of view,  
it is never too late!  
It is never too late for anyone to grow in hope – even us!

This week you may want to go "walkabout" with this parable yourself.  
And you may find it speaks to you in even more ways!

Today I can tell you,  
just from circumambulating this parable,  
the Good News surely is:  
From God's point of view,  
it is never too late!  
It is never too late  
for any of us to grow in love, and faith, and hope!

Amen.

**Sources:**

*Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* by Clarence Jordan & Bill Lane Doulos  
*Gospel Light: Comments on the Teachings of Jesus from Aramaic and Unchanged Eastern Customs* by George Lamsa  
*The Hidden Gospel: Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus* by Neil Douglas-Klotz  
*In the Heart of the World: Thoughts, Stories, and Prayers* by Mother Teresa

**Text:**

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.' 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? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."