

**The Last Will Be First**  
(Matt 20:1-16)

9/24/23  
Rev. J. Koyama

**Unfair!: Parallels With the Prodigal Son**

Today's Gospel Reading is about the perceived unfairness in this world. Not necessarily the actual unfairness, although there is plenty of that.

This story is very similar to the story of the Prodigal Son, if you look at that story from the point of view of the older brother. He was the one who couldn't get over it, when his father was overjoyed and "killed the fatted calf" to celebrate the return of his younger brother, who came home from blowing his inheritance. He told his father, "I've been here all this time working with you and you never even set aside a goat to celebrate me."

The older brother's grievance is like the grievance of the workers who showed up first in this morning's Gospel and got paid last. And it's a lot like how we all feel sometimes - unappreciated for our efforts.

Both stories are an honest expression of the fact that sometimes it seems as though, in caring for the least deserving, God and others, actually end up treating the most faithful and hard-working servants the most unfairly.

And when we think about it, there is a sense in which these stories are true to life. Some people stand idly by or in the case of the Prodigal Son story, behave irresponsibly, while others are stuck with the hard work of holding it all together. And those less invested in God's work still seem to have it just as good or sometimes even seem to get the better end of the deal. But is it really as unfair as it looks at first?

### **Who is First and Last?**

There is something very interesting and subtle that happens in this morning's Gospel story that throws into question the assumption that the workers who were hired last and worked the shortest shift, really did get the better end of the deal.

At the very end of the story Jesus says, "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." It is a sentence Jesus uses to sum up what we have heard. But, he doesn't actually spell out who is first and who is last. It is left for us, who are the hearers to fill in the blanks, based on what we have heard. Does he mean that the people who were hired first end up last and that the people who got hired last end up first? Or does he mean that the people who got paid first end up last and the people who were paid last end up first?

This uncertainty is caused by the fact that, in the evening, when it came time to pay the workers, the manager reversed the expected order, so that the people who started working last and did the least amount of work, got paid first. And the people who started work first got paid last.

I think that one of the reasons the order gets flipped is because it highlights the apparent injustice in the situation. We can picture in our minds the people who worked all day under the scorching sun. They look weary and worn out and ready to go home. And we can see the resentment on their faces, as they watch the much fresher workers parade past them and go out the door first with pay in hand.

And then, as if to rub salt in the wound, they get paid the same, in spite of the fact that they did most of the work. In fact, if you calculate it on an hourly basis, they actually got paid less. Not only that, but when they grumble about it, they come off looking like sore losers in the eyes of the manager. He tells them, "I never promised you anything other a fair day's wages." And it is also true, as he points out, that it is not their business to tell him who he can treat generously.

The whole story leads us to believe that the workers who worked hardest and longest and felt somehow short-changed end up being last. And that the ones who did the least amount of work end up being first.

Likewise, in the story of the Prodigal Son, we are led to understand that the older brother who stayed home and worked longest and hardest for his father and who was aggrieved when his father put on a lavish celebration when the younger son returned - he also felt as though, while being first in his contribution to his father's work, he was being treated as the last.

Understanding these stories this way seem's a bitter pill for those of us who identify with the tired workers in the one story, and the older brother in the other. We feel as though we have held the fort and done the lions share of the work, and we come away feeling unappreciated and worse, looking like we hold a grudge.

But it is also important to understand the stories this way, because of the way God's forgiveness is highlighted for all of us, in spite of our undeserving. Because in one way or another, we have all been like those who "stood idly by in the marketplace" or were away following our own desires, while others were doing God's work.

## The Other Way Around

And yet, this is not the only way to understand these stories. Don't forget that, when Jesus summarizes this morning's Gospel story, that he does not actually say which group is first and which is last. And I think that is his way of asking us what we see and asking us to fill in the blanks for ourselves.

So, I want to turn the story on its head and go to bat in favor of saying that the workers who went to work first and got paid last, the ones who stayed the course and worked through the day in the hot sun, are the ones who end up first. That it is in fact they, who should be most satisfied with what they have received.

Nor do I think the younger son, who dominates the Prodigal Son story with his spectacular display of repentance, is the one who comes out ahead. Instead, I think that it is the older brother, who stayed and worked for his father, who will quietly end up having had the deeper and richer life, if he will only let go of comparing himself with his brother long enough to appreciate his father's responses.

I am looking at the story in this alternative way, for reasons that have to do with the way we think about work.

### **The Poi Field**

Once, back when I was a minister in Hawaii, I went on an Association Youth Camp to the north shore of Kauai. And one of the activities we had planned was to clear weeds and grass from the channels running through a taro field.

On the scheduled day it was drizzling. But by the time we got to the field, it was raining fairly hard and water was gushing down the mountain slope and through the channels. We decided to divide the group into people who would jump in and clear the channels and others who would stay on the embankments to carry away the weeds and grass that was thrown up to them.

At first the water looked quite cold and forbidding. But, you can't lead a youth group and not be willing to set the example. So I and the others who volunteered, jumped into the water and went to work clearing the channels.

The water was cold at first and the channel was thick with weeds. But as we got into it, our bodies warmed and we ended up having a great time, shouting to each other in the gushing water, as we threw the weeds up onto the bank to be carried away by the others.

But another segment of the second group, stood off to the side shivering and watching. They could not get over how dirty and wet and cold it all was, and so they shivered and huddled together and slow walked the process, grumbling amongst themselves. “What kind of summer camp was this?”

### **Assumptions about Work**

I share this story, because I think it reverses how we think about who comes out first and who comes out last in the Gospel story.

So far, we have highlighted the idea that the people who worked longest and were worn out by the sun and still got paid the same, somehow came out with the short end of the stick.

But I think that is based on an assumption that hard work is somehow odious and that it is preferable to do as little as possible, so that we can have more time to be left to our own devices. It is based on the

assumption that hard work, in itself, has no intrinsic value, other than to increase our earnings; that somehow not having to work in the hot sun or the cold muddy water is preferable.

But the fact is, the kids who stood by the side and refused to work on that rainy day in the Poi field were miserable. They stood by shivering and miserable on a day in which they could have had a blast and come home exhausted and happy. And it was all because of the way they thought about the work that was offered to them.

I think that this basic scenario applies to people of all ages in all kinds of situations. Especially in a freedom loving culture like ours, we design things in order to minimize work and maximize free time.

I do not believe that people should be overworked or taken advantage of or that workaholism is a good thing. It is clearly not. I also think that there are definitely people who need to learn how to relax or just do nothing once in a while.

But I also think that skating through life without ever knowing the satisfaction that comes from a good hard and sometimes exhausting day's work, is also deeply unfortunate.



## **Work is a Blessing**

Some will look at those “standing idly by in the marketplace,” in other words, people who are unemployed, and assume that they are having a great time abusing the system and getting over on everyone else. Some of them probably think they are.

But to my mind, and I was unemployed when I first returned here from Hawaii, it was a terrible experience. My self esteem, my self-confidence, my sense of purpose and connection with others, all just came apart, not to mention what happened to my savings. So, why do we assume that those who are “standing idly by in the marketplace” are somehow getting the better end of the deal?

The reality is that a full day's work that is constructive and that contributes to the well-being of others, is itself a blessing from God. A hidden value that is not recorded in spreadsheets, and was probably visibly recorded in the manager's notebook, when all the workers were being paid. But this hidden value is as important for balancing the ledger as the paycheck itself.

At the same time, the toll of the anxiety and uncertainty over where the next meal would come from, the lack of purpose and loss of self-esteem in their own eyes and the eyes of their families, none of these things would have been visibly recorded in the negative column of the ledger, when it came to those who waited most of the day before being hired.

For our well-being, we all need to be gainfully employed in some way; somehow doing God's work. Even if that involves dragging ourselves out of bed to the sound of that dreadful alarm clock and facing the daunting challenges of the day. And therefore, I say that even if it doesn't always seem like it, the ones who work longest and hardest do come out first, because, even though they are often exhausted by the end of the day, their souls will be amply rewarded in the unseen and unrecorded ways that really count.

### **Here's to a fruitful fall Season**

We are coming out of the summer now and into a potentially busy fall. My prayer is that, as long standing servants of God, you have been able to find some time to rest as I have. Because we are entering into one of the busier stretches of the year leading up to Christmas. And all of us will be faced with one or another occasion to grumble or feel unappreciated.

But what I think this reading says to us is, “It depends on how you look at it.” Almost all of you are on the side of the ledger where you get paid nothing. In fact, you contribute financially and come to worship and do the work of the church all at your own expense.

I think it is good for us, as we enter into the fall, to look around us and acknowledge that everyone of you is here on a noble venture. You here out of the goodness of your own hearts; out of a heartfelt response to the love of God. None of us are primarily here because we believe that the visible side of the ledger is the only side that exists.

It is the invisible side of the ledger, the love of God and the satisfaction and sometimes the suffering for others that we take away from doing God’s work that ultimately rules our hearts. And that side of the ledger tallies up to a depth of vision, a strength of character and nobility of heart, that is of far greater value than any monetary figure that the visible side of the ledger could add up to.

That invisible balance exists because of the individual acts of faithfulness and the sacrifices you each make. And that invisible “paycheck” is what I think we should encourage others to come and join

us in working toward. Because we live in a world that sees the dollar figures, but often fails to see the side of the ledger, where hearts are invested in the good work of sharing God's love.

There will be times in the work ahead, when each of us are heartened by some quiet act of devotion and faithfulness on the part of another, that would otherwise be lost in the hustle and bustle. And I hope that each of us will make a point of somehow saying thank you or taking to heart what we have seen, so that this busy season may be in its own way an echo chamber of gratitude and blessings.

I look forward to doing some good hard work together this fall (not too much, I hope). And may we be blessed and strengthened in our faith and love for one another as we seek to serve the community together in God's name.