

STARTING AT THE WRONG PLACE

The noted preacher, Fred Craddock, once told a story about the time when he was a seminary professor and was invited to a student's church as guest preacher. On this particular occasion, he arrived early and was spontaneously asked to teach an adult Sunday School class. Responding graciously to this request, he discovered that the weekly lesson was based on Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (found in Luke 15). Since he had been so spontaneously recruited for this task, Fred Craddock decided to be equally spontaneous in the way he approached this overly familiar Bible story. He invited the class to imagine that the story ended differently. In this version, the prodigal son "comes to himself" and decides to go home and throw himself on his father's mercy. As he gets close to the house, he hears the sound of music and dancing. He asks one of the servants what is going on and the servant says, "Your father has killed the fatted calf and is holding a great feast for your older brother, because he has served him faithfully for so many years!" Suddenly everyone heard a loud thud as a woman in the class smashed her fist on the table. After an awkward moment of silence, the woman looked around at everyone and said, "It should have happened that way!" (J. Lynn White, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Summer 2005, p. 32)

Let's face it, Jesus told some parables that out-and-out offend our sense of what is right and fair according to the worldly standards we live by and judge others by. We expect a certain outcome to these stories, which our Lord taught, that is consistent with our value system based on the way things are and ought to be in the world in which "we live, and move, and have our being." Then, when we hear the punch line of one of Jesus' tales, we are shocked and surprised when the outcome flies in the face of what we deem "the way it should be!" I'm fairly certain that Jesus enjoyed telling these stories, with their unexpected endings, to catch us off guard and to instruct us, time and again, that our conventional wisdom is often contrary to God's will and way in the world. No matter what we think, God is going to tell the story God's own way in order to tell us what God's values the most, and thus, what we too should affirm about human life, as well as to remind us that God is the one in charge and we are not!

Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard is another one of those offensive stories that our Lord shared with his first disciples. We think we've got it all figured out before we get to the ending. Surely the laborers, who were hired last and only worked one hour in the vineyard, will earn one-twelfth the wages of those, who worked from sun-up to sundown. Or else, due to the fact that the last one's hired were paid a full day's wages, then, all things being fair, the ones who worked and sweated all day long will get their day's wages plus a big, fat bonus in their pay envelope. That's what we expect to happen in this crazy story but that's not what we get in the end.

To assume either one of those scenarios is to start at the wrong place. One of the foundational beliefs of our culture is that a person should get what he or she deserves. In other words, we are ingrained with the notion that you do an honest day's work for an honest day's wage; and, if you don't, then you won't! That's just how it is in the world. But, to read Jesus' parable with that kind of good business mindset dooms us from the start – why? – because this story isn't about a good business practice, fair labor laws or a lesson in economics. Instead, this parable of the laborers in the vineyard is all about God and what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's where we need to begin this story! Anything else is starting at the wrong place; and, if we start at the wrong place, we will probably end up somewhere else other than where God intends and where we need to be.

The truth is that the landowner did no wrong. He did not cheat the all-day workers. He hired them early in the morning to work in his vineyard for the usual daily wage. And guess what they received for toiling all day long? They were paid the going rate for the usual daily wage – no surprise there and certainly no cheating either. The landowner paid all of the workers the same amount of money, no matter how long or how little they had worked. While we scratch our heads and wonder about the inequity of it

all, Jesus wants us to see that the landowner was not trying to be fair, he was trying to be generous. He wasn't giving the workers their pay because of merit; he was giving them their pay out of compassion. The owner gave each worker a day's wage – enough to feed and take care of a family. Now the light begins to dawn a bit and grow brighter.

If we try to understand this story in terms of entitlement - that the ones who worked the longest hours should get more pay than the ones who worked the fewest hours or just one hour – then, we start at the wrong place and we never will end up at the right destination. However, if we begin to see that the point of this parable is about how God's grace and mercy are at work in the world, instead of what's fair or who's deserving, then we will understand and even experience this parable far more.

Regarding this parable, John Claypool, said, "As long as the workers stayed focused on what had been given them, their experience was one of incredible joy... however, what had at first been the occasion of great celebration turned into something very different, because they gave way to the sidelong glance of envy! They began to compare what they had to what others had, rather than to what they had at the beginning, and it turned their joy into curdled bitterness... A fail-safe recipe for joy is regarding one's life as a gift. A fail-safe recipe for misery is comparing one's self to someone else and forgetting what a grace life really is. (Stories Jesus Still Tells, pp. 32-33)

The place to start is God's grace and - thank God! – grace is not fair. After all the workers had been paid, and paid the same usual daily wage, the folks who had worked all day long grumbled against the landowner. The landowner got wind of their complaints and answered them by saying, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" God's generosity - God's love, grace, and mercy extended to all - is where we start and where we end up. Jesus could have spoken these words to his first disciples in order to instruct them that many others (including tax collectors and sinners) would follow him as recipients of God's grace; at any rate, these earliest disciples, who had the longest history with Jesus, did not have a leg-up on newcomers when it came to special rights and privileges within the kingdom of God. Perhaps Matthew, when he recorded this parable, was thinking of his Jewish –Christian audience, who were tempted to resent Gentiles coming into the church and leaving behind their pagan way. These words of Jesus are meant to remind us that all of us are in need of God's grace and no one is deserving, and, certainly no one is more deserving than some others. We all have need, and by the grace of God, God will meet those needs. It becomes quite clear by story's end that, yes, God is in charge! And, God's ways are not our ways. If God chooses to love us all and be generous to all of us, that's God's business. It's not ours to decide who's in or out, who is deserving or not.

The parable starts out as a story about a landowner and his employees. But, as Mark Trotter observes, the more we live with this story, it ends up looking more like a parent with a family, because that's the best human analogy for the Kingdom – the family. And the best human analogy for God is the parent. (What Are You Waiting for? Sermons on the Parables of Jesus, p. 57)

A woman being interviewed on television was one of those heroic mothers who raised a large family single-handedly. She not only raised them, but they were all successful, each having made remarkable achievements in his or her vocation. It was a wonderful story, worth celebrating. In an attempt to get some formula, some rule that others could apply in order to have similar success with their families, the mother was asked, "I suppose you loved all your children equally, making sure they all got the same treatment?" The mother replied, "I loved them. I loved them all, each one of them, but not equally. I loved the one that was down until he was up. I loved the one that was weak until she was strong. I loved the one that was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one that was lost until she was found." (Ibid, p. 58) That's how God loves us, each and every last one of us. God gives us what we need – divine grace and mercy – and God holds nothing back. If indeed this parable is about God the parent, and we are the children created in God's own image, then this parable helps us to see that we are meant to be generous, gracious, and merciful to others. When we start in the right place with the grace of God and we, in turn, follow Jesus by being gracious, inclusive, and welcoming to all others, then we end up right where God

intends for us to be – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Randall C. Stevens – First Presbyterian/Martinsville, VA – September 21, 2008)