Biblical Text: Matthew 20:1-16

**Introduction**

If there is one piece of pastoral advice I’ve learned deeply in my time in the office, it is: listen closely to the stories people tell over and over. They really aren’t telling you a story, they are telling you about themselves, or at least how they see themselves. Of course saying that means, all of you will stop telling me anything, so…

But it is not just individuals that this applies to, but to tribes and peoples and nations. What stories do they tell over and over? They are telling you who they are. And watching and listening to my kids grow up that has always been the biggest most shocking change. The stories that were relayed to me as a child were often tall tales folklore – Paul Bunyan and Babe and his big blue ox or Pecos Bill. What did those say? We are bigger and tougher than our surroundings. We have tamed the wild frontier. Growing up in Illinois we had all the Abraham Lincoln stories. From walking 10 miles to return a penny, to reading by candlelight, as well as the tougher ones, like Lincoln’s mother died early and his Dad was a real SOB. However bad you have it now, greatness is possible. We might even carve your face into a mountain. And I know there are people that complain about whitewashing history, but the stories and the history told didn’t ignore the bad stuff. Lincoln wasn’t a hero without the Emancipation Proclamation. Bible stories of course were common as well. I swear the Old Testament was known much better. But I would quiz my kids now and then about what they were studying or what were the important stories being told. And I would never hear any of those. The ones I’d hear were often simply what I’d call twisted.

And let me say twisted in this way. And this is Mark Brown’s observation, nobody is bound to this. But it has been something once I saw it, I couldn’t really unsee it. The stories that are being told are usually about various -isms. And unlike the old ones that were almost always told to say “this is who we are, we can do this.” The replacements were being told to tell you why you couldn’t.

The Fascism story was “that group of identifiable people is keeping you poor.” Of course the original version was the Jews, but the updated version is any group that is taking your spot. The feminism story was simply men are all trash and will never let you have anything. The socialist/communist story is that the system is against you. I don’t have a good ism – maybe call it decline-ism – that I often hear versions of in the church. It is an evil age, the faithful church is proven in her decline. And of course if you think the age is evil, or the system is rigged, or the all men are bad or some group Is taking yours, the effect of these stories is division, death and lethargy. If we can’t win, then why should be begin. We are all fighting over a distribution of a fixed and declining pie.

**Text – Always Work**

Jesus’ story of the Kingdom of Heaven today I think stands firmly against all those stories.

The first thing that is made clear is that the vineyard – the image that Jesus uses for the people of God in the midst of this world – the vineyard always has work. The master of the house – the image for Jesus or the Father – goes out early in the morning to find workers. There is more than enough work for a full day. But the work is such that he keeps going out. At the 3rd hour, and the 6th and the 9th and even the 11th hour. And what upsets him more than anything is idleness. He is convinced there is plenty of work. And when he saw some standing idle he tells them go to my vineyard I’ll pay you fairly. And even at the 11th hour. “Why have you been standing around here idle all day?” And they try and move the blame to someone else. “Nobody hired us.” Which can’t be true because this master was here at 6 Am, and 9AM and noon, and 3 PM, and now again at 5 PM. And he offered work to everyone. But no matter, you, go to my vineyard.

The vineyard – the People of God in the midst of the world – always has work. We are never going to be perfect here. Because this is a leaving, breathing, organic thing. And the curse of Adam was growth would come by the sweat of the brow. Read into the idea of the vineyard growth whatever you want: knowledge, holiness, sanctification, numbers, faith, love. There is always work in the vineyard. And the call goes out to everyone.

**Text – Fair Pay**

The reward, the wages, are always the same and completely unfair.

The idea of fairness is first introduced by the Master to the 9 AM guys. “whatever is right I will give you.” The 6 AM group knew what was promised – a denarius, a day’s wage. And they went gladly. All those after who went had at some level to trust the master on what is right. The expectation was probably some type of pro-rated denarius, but who knew.

So when the day is over at 6 PM and the master lines everyone up in reverse order and starts paying the 5 PM guys a full days wage, everyone in the back of the line is expecting more. We’ve worked the full day we deserve the bonus. But they all got the same.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, the wages are not related to the work. There is always work in the vineyard. And people will arrive at different times to work. But your work does not effect the wage. The wage is the same the moment you go to work in the vineyard. The wage in the same the moment you trust the master of the vineyard to give you what is right.

Of courses the wage is eternal life. The wage is forgiveness of all sin. If God was fair, we’d never get either of those things. The wage is completely unfair. It is completely unfair for the 5 PM workers and just as unfair for the 6 AM. Everyone who goes to the vineyard receives the same reward, the same wage. Of course this isn’t for the work. It is based on the faith. The faith that whatever this one gives us will be right. Not necessarily fair, but right.

Everyone who works in the vineyard receives eternal life which is completely unfair, but in our benefit.

**Moral**

But that very unfairness of God does bring a question upon us. Do we want a fair pecking order? That’s what they were grumbling for. “You have made them – the 5 PM boys – equal to us – the 6 AM arrivers. We’ve borne the burden and the heat all day.”

And if our eyes are focused on this world, we might continue to argue. The saints and martyrs might have a legitimate gripe. C’mon God, where is purgatory. Surely they have more work to do before they receive the reward. The demand for a fair God and a clear pecking order is almost irresistible. But the Master of the vineyard gives two responses.

First, I have done you no wrong, this is what we agreed upon. Whatever time you arrived in the Kingdom, the understanding has always been forgiveness of sins and life eternal. Jesus liked to say things like “the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering life before you.” The unfairness of God. It doesn’t depend upon timing or works done here. Just that you believed his offer and went. And the offer is always the same.

The second thing Jesus says is “I chose this, do you begrudge my generosity?”

God has chosen to be gracious with us. Do we prefer the law? The law is always fair. It convicts all of us. If we want the law, we can have it. “Take what is ours – not heaven, not foregiveness of sins – take what is ours, what meager reward we can scratch out of this earth and go.” Or we can rejoice in the grace.

That the question presented to us. Do we want fairness and the law, or God’s Righteousness – his rightness – and the gospel?

**Eschatology**

This is a much better story to tell. If we want a story to root our identities in, this parable of the Kingdom is a much better one.

Unlike the -isms of the day, it will not stoop to casting blame at the 5 PM’ers. Oh, they want to do that, but the master takes them to task. That is not how the Kingdom works. You cannot divide by perceived work. Because the last will be first and the first last.

Unlike the -isms of the day, there is always more than enough in the Kingdom. The master can pay whatever he wants. There is always plenty of work.

And maybe most importantly, unlike the -isms of the day, the Kingdom is for you. At the very minimum God shall grant you what you thought you were getting: forgiveness and eternal life. But this is a gracious God. He has not just hired workers who he will send home. He has made us heirs. He has given us the vineyard. The Kingdom is yours should you stay.

It’s a much better story to tell. The one who hired us, let me tell you about his righteousness. He isn’t fair, but he has always given us what more than what is right.