

## HOW DO YOU END A PARABLE?

Matthew 20:1-16

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on September 20, 2020, the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.*

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*“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.”*

### **Prayer:**

*Please, with your unseen, refined and pure power, establish my thoughts in your service, in awe, in trembling and in reverence... And between two cherubs, may your word come and console me.<sup>1</sup> And may I speak the truth in love, that your word may console and challenge others. Amen.*

With the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg late Friday, I fear that one more wick has been placed in the powder keg our nation appears on the verge of becoming. When added to

- Pandemic
- Presidential election
- Economic dislocation
- Citizens killing police and police killing citizens and citizens killing one another – nearly all disproportionate for people of color
- Plus wildfires and hurricanes

we are left feeling that that even though we learn more each week about keeping ourselves relatively safe from COVID 19, the changing of the leaves from the green of a lush summer to the oranges and reds and yellows of Fall does not seem to promise much relief or hope. It is safer for children to step onto a soccer field than into a classroom. It is safer for people to stand and sing the hymns of our faith alone at home than to stand or sing in the sanctuary they so dearly miss. “Is the end near?” someone wrote me this week. “Pastor, do you think the end is near?”

Nearly every national institution is under stress in ways we have rarely seen in decades:

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<sup>1</sup> From “The Prayer of Ramban,” 13<sup>th</sup> century.

- The medical establishment and scientific community
- Courts
- Congress
- Universities
- Military brass
- The diplomatic corps
- Journalists around the world
- Schools
- Sports
- Nearly all types of businesses and professional practices
- City councils and school boards
- Local churches, synagogues, mosques.

Millions of ordinary people are near the breaking point: from too much pressure, too much time, too much isolation, too much loneliness, too much verbal and linguistic warfare in the news we consume and in the family conversations we try to have, too much physical harm in the streets, too much work and parenting and home schooling all in one day.

Yesterday morning, I took a break from writing this sermon to replenish the bird seed in my feeder in the backyard. I was immediately reminded of the criticism Voltaire received when he concluded *Candide*, his dark satire against the religious and political violence of his day, with the words “We must cultivate our garden.”<sup>2</sup>

But such simple pleasures are all many of us can find to do. If we live alone, contact with seed and earth and plant and pet may be the only contact we have with living beings for weeks at a time. Ours is clearly a time in which as people of faith we yearn for a word from the Lord concerning what to do, when and with whom to do it.

## I.

But the text before us today is not a *simple* word from the Lord. It does not bestow upon us the luxury of hearing: “Do this,” “Do that”; “Believe this,” “Believe that”; “Pray this, pray that.”

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard – one of dozens of parables Jesus bequeathed to us – is in normal times one of the most intellectually intriguing parables. In the jarring times in which we live, the parable is jarring as well.

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The story line is simple: A landowner goes out early in the morning to hire day laborers to work in his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the going rate, he sends them into his vineyard. He returns at nine a.m., sees others standing idle in the marketplace, hires them and promises to pay “whatever is right.” They go and work in the vineyard.

At noon and at 3:00 p.m., the landowner returns to the marketplace and hires more workers. He returns at 5:00 p.m. and finds still others standing around. He asks them why they are “idle” and they say: “No one has hired us.” “You also go into the vineyard,” he says.

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<sup>2</sup> Voltaire, *Candide*, translated by Lowell Bair (New York: Random House, Inc. 1959). Originally published by 1759.

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When Maggie and I were on Swan's Island, Maine, in August, I had a sleepless night and about 4:00 a.m. she awakened as well. It was a clear, cold night, with no fog, stars in the sky, so we decided to walk down to the docks and watch the lobster fishermen go out. We noticed closer to the water a young man and young woman, standing together, bantering with other lobstermen and lobsterwomen, helping them load their traps onto the boats, bringing them coffee, parking their vehicles.

About half hour after the all the boats had set sail, they walked up the hill to where we were standing, stopped and talked. We couldn't tell if they were boyfriend/girlfriend, brother/sister, or just two young people trying to get work. They explained that they come out every morning, hoping to get hired to go on one of the boats for the day, seeking to learn the island trade and eventually get their license and boat.

They left in a pickup truck to get breakfast on the other side of the island where an industrious islander has opened up a food truck serving breakfast sandwiches and coffee several mornings a week. "We'll come back about 2:00," they said. "Usually people will hire us to help unload their traps."

By this time we surmised the couple were boyfriend/girlfriend. They seemed young and fresh and happy together. The late-modelled pickup was probably the possession of the young man's parents, but when he smiled at us, we could not help but notice his teeth were black as coal. I doubt he had ever left the island to see a dentist.

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Back at the vineyard, when evening comes, the landowner tells his manager to call the laborers, give them their pay, "beginning" he adds, "with the last hired and then going to the first."

When those hired at five o'clock arrive at the payment table, each receives a full day's pay. Watching this unfold from the back of the line, those who had been hired at 6:00 a.m. assume they will receive more; but when they arrive at the table, they too receive a day's wage.

The emotional temperature of the parable picks up. When the all-day workers finally arrive at the table to receive their pay, they are paid the same amount as those who have worked only a few hours. Jesus then diplomatically says "They *grumble* against the landowner." I suppose Jesus wanted to refrain from using the words they actually use. But in addition to whatever words they use, and their degree of unprintability, the all-day workers say two things worth our noting. We will look at them in reverse order.

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First, the all-day workers say: "We have borne *the burden of the day*" – an eloquent way of speaking – and then they *add* "and *the scorching heat*."

This is likely an accurate description of the weather in which they worked, but in the narrative of the parable itself, the *heat* has not been mentioned. The mention of the heat – for the first time – when the workers are already angry and expressing their displeasure – is an *escalation* of the conversation.

It simply reminds us that in human conflict, one intense comment – even when accurate – leads to another intense comment. And while intensity is real, anger is real, emotion is real, once unleashed, it only stops when the situation explodes and damage is done, or when someone has the courage to step forward and de-escalate. For peace to be restored to a level of constructive conversation, scorching heat has to be cooled down by someone with courage, strength, and a willingness to risk.

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The other thing all-day workers say – which they say first – explains why it is hard for any one individual to step forward and try to de-escalate. The all-day workers say: “*You have made them* – these three-hour workers – *equal to us.*” They are in effect saying to the landowner: “Because you have paid these people who worked only three hours the same you have paid us, you have made them equal to us.” “You have diminished us. You have insulted us. You have humiliated us.” “You have made them *equal.*”

This simply shows that it is deeply embedded within our *fallen* – as opposed to our *created* – human nature that our *value* as human beings is tied to the *effort* we make – and our *status* is tied to the *success* of our efforts. *Value for efforts; status for results.* This is so ingrained since the Fall that very few of us are immune from feeling superior to our fellow human beings who put forth less effort or know less success. “You have made them *equal* to us,” the all-day workers say.

## II.

At this point, I want to stop and say that there is debate among interpreters and even translators as to where this parable ends. We are not entirely certain what Jesus said versus what Matthew added as commentary.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly all scholars believe the next line originates with Jesus:

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...

When I teach this parable in class, I say: “This is *contract* law,” The landowner and the all-day worker agree to a certain wage. The workers do the work and landowner pays according to the agreement. Both fulfill their agreements. Neither does anything wrong. Nothing outside the contract matters. The case is open and shut. We identify with that.

But then the landowner says: “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?”

In class, I say this seems an expression of *property* rights. Also embedded deep within our fallen selves lies the belief that on whatever property we own, we have the right to control what happens and what doesn’t happen. When Maggie and I have visited her brother in a Cleveland suburb, a home on a major thoroughfare near their house stands out.

The home is owned by an eccentric couple who are gadflies at community meetings and at open sessions of city council. They have progressively over the years added item by item to their front yard: expensive sculptures, lamps and birdbaths, political signage, old cars and washing machines, neon lights and blasts from a 1970s stereo. It has always been something of a highlight of the trip to see what else they have managed to fit into the yard since the last time we visited.

But when we visited this past July, the yard was cleared, grass mown, home blending into the neighborhood. The man was sitting on the front porch, reading the paper, smoking a cigar. Maggie’s brother explained that the city had finally gotten permission of a court to clear out all the debris, but that only occurred after a fire broke out in the home.

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<sup>3</sup> This work is based on John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973), 111-120. This book has been highly influential to me in my understanding of parables over the last several decades.

When we looked closely, we noticed a few items had crept back into the yard. I imagine there will be more on a future visits.

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”

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Apparently neither Jesus nor Matthew wanted the parable to end on a ringing assertion of property rights, because the next line turns the parable in a different direction, as the landowner says:

“Are you *envious* because I am *generous*?” The more literal translation reads: “Is your *eye evil* because I am *good*?”

Whoever chose to end the parable here presents us with a way beyond anger, beyond contract law, beyond property rights. In the midst of our sense of our own value and worth derived from the *effort* we make or the *success* we know, Jesus is *asking* each of us to *see – really see* – the blessing that occurs in someone else’s life. “Is your *eye evil*...?” “Are you *envious* when I am *generous*?” “Is your *eye envious*?” Jesus is asking us to be so open to seeing the blessing that occurs in *someone else’s life* that we are drawn to celebrate.

### III.

Speaking to our present moment, I would add that if we are ever going to see blessing in someone else’s life, we need some sense that they, like us, are created in the image of God, and we need to some sense that we are all part of a community, that we are not an island, that we are in this thing called human life together.

Part of being together means that

- That sometimes others will receive blessings that we do not
- That we who have often been first will need to stand at the end of the line
- That things will not always line up with the way our deepest sense of ourselves and the world are intended to be
- And that sometimes blessing comes through reversal of the way we expect or believe.

But God’s generosity is unlimited. The all-day workers are paid. The only suffering they encounter is to their sense of worth being tied to effort and outcome. In this instance, the generosity of God turns out to be greater than their sense of what produces human worth.

My friends, the only way we will survive this Fall in our country, our city, our church is if, over the next several months, we strive to *see* that we are part of a community and strive to see – and even *celebrate* – the blessing of God as it is bestowed in the lives of other people, many of whom we have not heretofore considered as worthy as we are.

- The aspiring couple on the dock, hoping for work in the only industry they have ever known.
- The eccentric couple in Cleveland.
- The police who guard their yard and the sanitation workers who clear it away.
- The laborers hired at 6 and 9 and noon and 3 and 5, and the landowner who hires them.

All created in the image of God, all worthy members of the human community of which we are worthy members as well, our fates on earth linked. Amen.