

A Very Unusual Employer<sup>1</sup>  
Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16  
Collegiate Presbyterian Church  
September 18, 2011

Exodus 16:2-15

<sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” <sup>4</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” <sup>6</sup>So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, <sup>7</sup>and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” <sup>8</sup>And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but” against the LORD. <sup>9</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” <sup>10</sup>And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. <sup>11</sup>The LORD spoke to Moses and said, <sup>12</sup>“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

<sup>13</sup>In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup>When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. <sup>15</sup>When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.

Matthew 20:1-16

<sup>20</sup>“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>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?’ <sup>7</sup>They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of

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<sup>1</sup> The overall theme and direction of this sermon was inspired by Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon, “Beginning at the End,” published in *Seeds of Heaven* by Forward Movement Publications, 1990, pp. 73-80.

the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'<sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.<sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.<sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,<sup>12</sup> 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.'<sup>13</sup> 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?'<sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.<sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'<sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

### Sermon

Do you ever just feel like being generous?

Like leaving a 50% tip rather than 15 or 20%?

Like buying the ice cream of the family of seven  
behind you at Dairy Queen?

Like letting five cars pull out in front of you  
in the Jack Trice parking lot rather than one?

Well, a little like Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning,  
the householder in Jesus' parable  
just felt like being generous!

You heard the story.

Early, early in the morning he went into the marketplace...  
to the corner where the day laborers hung out...  
and he hired a few of them  
to work in his vineyard for the day.

He offered them a denarius...

a typical day's wage...  
enough to feed a typical family for one day...  
and they were glad to have it!

But by nine in the morning it was clear

there was more work than they could do,  
so the householder went back to the corner again...

then again at noon... and still again at three...

bringing more and more workers back with him each time...  
promising to pay them whatever was right.

Finally, at five in the afternoon,

with only an hour of sunlight left,  
he went back to the corner  
and found a few men still standing around.

He gathered them up, took them back to the vineyard,

where they helped the others finish up the day's work.

Then comes the moment they've all been waiting for.

As the blazing sun sets and the cool breeze stirs the dusk,  
the householder summons his steward  
to give them their pay.  
Beginning with the last to be hired,  
the steward pressed a denarius into each of their hands.  
When these latecomers gasp at the amount,  
the others begin to press forward  
straining to see what's going on.  
A murmur stirs in the crowd.  
It turns out the householder is a very generous man!  
And if he pays the latecomers a whole denarius  
for just one hour's work,  
then we're in for a big payday!

Yet, before they can do the math in their heads,  
the steward has paid them all –  
one denarius... one denarius... one denarius.  
Whether they came at dawn and slaved all day  
or showed up at five to work the last hour,  
their pay is the same.

The murmur soon turns to grumbling.  
Their faces sunburned and their clothes sweated through:  
“These last worked only an hour,  
and you have made them equal to us who have borne  
the burden of the day and the scorching heat,” they say.

That's when the householder reminds them of their agreement.  
He has paid them exactly what he promised.  
The vineyard is his... the money is his...  
isn't he allowed to do what he wants with what is his?  
“Or do you,” he asks, “do you begrudge my generosity?”

Well, you bet they do!  
And I'm guessing so do we.  
Like most human beings,  
we have an innate sense of what is fair and what is not  
and we know in our bones  
that equal pay for UNEqual work is not fair.

Life is so often not fair... people are so often not fair...  
which is why it seems all the more important  
that God should be.  
God should be the one authority we can count on  
to reward people according to their efforts...  
to keep track of how long and hard we have worked...  
and to keep people from breaking in line ahead of us.

Life may not be fair, so God should be.

But it is not so.

According to today's story, God is not fair,  
According to today's story, God is this householder  
who presses the same coin into every hand  
regardless of how many hours were worked.  
God is this "unusual employer"  
who breaks all the rules we have created  
our sense of fairness and is just generous;  
giving each person just what they need.

Did you notice?

Like the Israelites in the wilderness,  
everyone in this story receives their manna...  
their "daily bread"...  
regardless of their station in life...  
whether they worked one hour or twelve.  
Everyone gets enough, but no one gets too much.<sup>2</sup>

Well, it seems to me that the key to unlocking  
the real power of this parable  
is figuring out where we locate ourselves in line.  
I'm imagining the workers all lined up;  
first to last (as Jesus says) -  
first-hired to last-hired.  
And I'm imagining the steward,  
beginning with the last hired,  
going down the line pressing a denarius into each palm.  
And I'm noticing that as he makes his way down the line...  
depending on where he is,  
the response he gets is very different.  
At the beginning the latecomers are positively giddy.  
"Look," they say to each other,  
"we only worked an hour but he is so generous...  
our kids can eat tonight!"  
But as he makes his way up the line to the front  
there begins a low murmuring  
which then turns to angry grumbling  
and finally turns into downright hostility.  
The pay is the same...  
the reaction is different...  
and it all depends on where you think you are in line...  
it all depends on what you think you deserve.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Campbell in his reflection on this passage in *Feasting on the Word (Year A, Vol. 4)*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, (WJK-2011). p. 95.

Well, I'm going to go out on a limb here  
and guess that most of us in this room  
identify with the first-hired workers.  
Presbyterians tend to be first-hired workers.  
We think of all the times we arrived early  
and stayed late  
and skipped lunch  
just to make sure the work got done.  
We tally up all the committees we have served on...  
all the loads of wash we have done...  
all the hours we have cared for our elderly mother  
when our sisters and brothers  
were off "living their lives."

That's how most of us hear this parable...  
from the front of the line...  
and the short end of the stick.

But what if we're mistaken?  
What if we're all wrong about where we are in line?  
What if just for a moment we could see what God sees?

I'll go ahead and say that I see myself as an all-day worker.  
Yet, the truth is there may be all sorts of people  
who are ahead of me in line...  
all sorts of folks who are far more deserving of God's love...  
who have lots more stars in their crowns that I will ever have.<sup>3</sup>

Many years ago, in an essay on this story  
Anthony Robinson was pondering his vegetable garden.  
It was about this time of year...  
his garden had produced pretty well all summer...  
yet what he noticed was that the part of his garden  
that was really flourishing  
was NOT the part he had so carefully planted  
in long straight rows.  
No, the part that was going gangbusters  
was a surprise patch of pumpkins and zucchini  
that he did not knowingly plant.  
The other seeds he measured out,  
patted into the earth,  
watered and weeded...  
but the pumpkin and zucchini came as a surprise –  
the unexpected gift (you guessed it)  
of the compost he had spread early in the spring.  
It was a wonderful reminder

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor.

that even though he had worked  
many long, hot days in his garden...  
still, in the end it was all a gift...  
and that the abundance and beauty of what he received  
was not at all in proportion to his labor and skill,  
but far exceeded them.<sup>4</sup>

Don't stop me if you've heard this one.  
There was a man who died and went to heaven.  
He was greeted at the pearly gates  
by a heavenly being with a clipboard and calculator.  
As the man approached the gates,  
the gatekeeper said, "Hold it there, Mister.  
You can't just walk in here.  
We have our procedures... and I need to see your points."  
Puzzled, the man said, "Points? What points?"  
"You know," the being said,  
"the points you earned  
by the kind of life you lived on earth.  
You have to have two-hundred points to get in here.  
So tell me, what did you do in your life  
that would earn you points?"

"Well," the man said,  
"I was a member of my church for 47 years.  
And I was a Sunday school teacher for 32 years."  
"That's good," the gatekeeper said. "You get one point."  
"Oh my," the man said.  
"Let me think some more.  
Well, I was a good husband...  
a good father... I think my children loved me.  
I tithed to the church  
and I worked once each month at the soup kitchen.  
Oh, and I was a Rotarian  
and served four years on the board of the homeless shelter."  
"That's very good" the being said. "You get another point."

Starting to worry, the man thinks and thinks...  
and finally throws up his hand and says  
"My goodness, if I get in here it'll be by the grace of God."  
"OK," said the gatekeeper,  
"that's worth 198 points. Welcome to heaven!"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony B. Robinson, "Wild Zucchini," *Christian Century*, August 25-September 1, 1993, p.815.

<sup>5</sup> I have heard this story in several different settings and forms. I don't know where it originated but consider it to be in the common domain.

Where am I in line, really?  
Where are you, really?  
Are we really the all-day workers?  
Or are we the recipients of grace... upon grace... upon grace?  
For some inscrutable reason,  
God chooses to love indiscriminately.  
And even more, God seems to enjoy dismantling  
the little systems and hierarchies we set up  
to separate winners from losers,  
superior and inferior,  
those who deserve and those who don't.  
By starting at the wrong end of our lines,  
with the last and the least,  
we are given notice that God's ways are not our ways,  
and that if we want to see things God's way  
we might just let God be the judge of where we are in line.  
God is not fair.  
And as hard as this is for us to hear,  
it is absolutely THE BEST NEWS I can give you today.  
Because if God is not fair  
then there's always a chance we will get paid  
more than we're worth,  
that we will make it through the door  
even though we are toward the back of the line.<sup>6</sup>  
God is generous!  
Giving us enough, but not too much.  
Giving us everything we need...  
daily...  
for the rest of our lives.

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, again.