

## *“What God Gives”*

Matthew 20:1-16

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This gospel passage from Matthew is a parable, the particular kind of story that Jesus tells throughout the Gospels. Parables are not simple allegories, where every x equal a y, where, for example, the Vineyard owner? God. Vineyard – life of faith or kingdom life, on earth as it is heaven. Workers – us, and we need to figure out how we would line ourselves up by the time we arrived to following Jesus to figure out where we stand at the end of it.

Instead, parables are invitations to imagine your life in a sliding door moment – which is a reference to a not terrible 1998 Gywenh Paltrow movie that explores two possible lives for her if she makes a subway train before a door closes or she doesn't - or if string theory and parallel universes are correct – to imagine that in this world right now, we are living a reality as real as we can figure it, but that there are realms we can't fully access but intersect with our lives. The word parable in the Greek means to throw alongside of. When Jesus wants to help us imagine the kingdom of heaven – which in Matthew means how it intersects with earth now – he throws out some images and illustrations for us to consider. Parables invite us into something at once familiar – ever been to a vineyard? Ever gotten paid at the end of a workday? Ever hired anyone for a job? Yet also not - the whole system of the parable – is so outside of ours that it is hard to figure out its intersection with our lives without throwing it out as unrealistic in our world or impossible to translate to our real economy and our real life.

Which is exactly what the parable wants you to do, to find yourself standing at the end of the parable, which is at the end of the day, quoting Les Miserable to the radical message of this parable. Everyone gets one coin no matter the hours of work? I don't think so. I'm pretty sure at the end of the day you getting nothing for nothing, and sitting flat on your bum doesn't buy any bread.

The parable makes you ask yourself where your attention is at the end of it by imagining the range of where the attention is of the people with their hands open who receive one coin. If you were the first ones in the vineyard – the Kiley Johnsons of the story (from the Children's Message), your attention is focused on your hand, and you are angrily looking down at what you don't have, what isn't fair, what should be yours but isn't. If you were the absolute last one to walk in the vineyard, the Evan Ayers of the parable - your attention is not on what is in your hand. It is on the one who gave it, you are looking at the giver of abundant, surprising generosity, the one who understands that once you walked into the vineyard you realized you wanted to be there all along, but needed something different to make it in than those early birds. You might be making a few nervous sideways glances at the people to the left of you to see if they are angry at you, and when they have looked up from the disappointment of the one coin with faces now turned in anger and blame your direction “these ones only worked one hour” you

keep your gaze on the one who gave it as if to say, I don't know the system, but I am pretty sure this was all the owner's idea.

And that is just right. This was all the owner's idea. To spend the day sending more and more people in. That is what the owner does. Send more and more people in – no one gets kicked out, no one gets turned away. They are not sent into the vineyard because they are showing any gifts at vineyarding – or whatever you do in a vineyard. They don't have nimble fingers, strong statures, experience in the work. One of my favorite parts of the passage that is a modern read back into it, is that twice the owner calls them "others". He saw others, others were standing there – and they get sent in. Love that. They were there and they weren't in the vineyard yet, so the owner got them in the vineyard. That was the day's work of the owner of the vineyard, getting people through the gate, or door, maybe a trellis – however you get in. This is our sliding door, parallel universe, where the owner sends us in by the nature of our being, our being there, rather than anything about us. Although I will resist allegory in a parable in general, I am pretty sure that vineyard owner is God and God wants everyone in. The ones chosen first, and the ones no one has picked all day. That is why this is a sliding door moment and parallel universe of the kingdom of God, because it doesn't usually feel this way. We humans are constantly comparing, assigning places of status on imaginary number lines. Are you a parent with a kid on a sports team? I bet you are really clear on that line from the best players to the worst. Are you a student in school? I bet you are really clear on the highest at math, band, writing to the lowest. Working in an office? You could probably draw a line from the best performing to the worst. This is how our minds work and sort. This is not how God does it.

When God sorts, there is no last, because I am thinking more and more that when God says the last will be first, it is because there is no line but a circle. Because in this parable, the last are not actually first – other than in the order they receive their same one coin. They are just not less than. Maybe the last shall be first is a way of saying that you get to the end and go right back to the beginning. The last hired receive the same gift as the first hired, and if those end-of-the-day last hired ones are first in anything, it is turning their heads in the direction of the giver, the hirer, the sender, the one who sees, the one who needs you. What must it have been like to feel needed for people who waited all day unwanted? Transformative, like nothing will ever be the same again.

Here is the thing about that coin placed in the hand of the before-the-sun worker and the hand of the 5:00 p.m. worker that this scripture implies but doesn't say. God only has one coin to give. Because God doesn't compare or assign places of status, God does not have a gradation of gifts. If you are in the vineyard, God has one gift to give you. And what do you think that gift is?

The presence of the owner and the life of the kingdom. You don't get more of the presence of God than I do, even if you are the best worker in the kingdom of God known to humanity and I am the worst. Even if you have been doing this work since you were a toddler and I am a newbie. God's one gift is the presence of God. God's one gift is a life of purposeful work following our savior Jesus Christ, who is also a gift.

We resist this. We want God to see how good we are and like us better, give us more. We want God to see how hard we work, how right we are, and save the best for us. When I was a child the neighbor across the street, on Halloween, saved full size Hershey Bars for the children in the neighborhood she knew. We would ring her doorbell and watch her put down the ordinary bowl and go bring us the good stuff, and we were so self-congratulatory about getting what we got – a full size Hershey – when the other kids got small dumbbell lollipops. Stinks to be them. And Lord, that felt good. And sometimes we showed other kids what we got that they didn't. This parable is the opposite of this. We don't get bigger, golder, more coins because of any special relationship with God, we all get the coin of God's presence, Jesus death, resurrection and forgiveness, a calling to live a life working in God's presence for God's purpose, which puts a purpose under our feet that is steady ground. One gift, one coin, for each one of us.

At the end of the day, instead of getting nothing for nothing, we get everything for not much. For even if we worked since the early morning hours, did we really earn what God gave us? No we did not. So the end-of-day posture we should all have is the person who holds the coin while staring straight at the giver, with a heart full of the kind of grace we feel when we do not get what we deserve, we do not get what we have worked for, or earned, but so much more than our imagined equations of input and output would give us.

And then, like the person forgiven of the great debt last week, who won't forgive a small one, we have to not pat ourselves on the back for our coin, or think we got it because of any privilege, or specialness, on our part, or any attitude that limits our acceptance of God's generosity. We just have to point to what a great God we have, what a surprisingly abundantly generous God, who found us standing there, and sent us in, who found us standing there, and sent us in, who found us standing there, and sent us in, as many times as it takes, as many times as our hands at the end of the day can hold the coin until we tilt our heads in gratitude to the one who placed it there. God enjoys being generous, and God is reckless, in our human calculation, with the blessing of God's presence. But there is one more thing to remember. God never runs out of coins. God will not run out of coins before God gets to you, no matter where you find yourself sorted out on any line of any measure. The only thing that keeps us from that coin is closing our hands from the work and the blessing of presence God wants to give. Hands open, heads up, thanks be to God.