

Matthew 19: 27-20:16
March 5, 2023
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Golden Hour

Last week with Dr. Blount we heard the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness from Matthew, the traditional opening scene for the church's observance of the Lenten season. As you may remember, this season lasts for forty days inviting us to pause, pray, listen, and reflect as we turn our attention to Jesus' teaching and preaching with his suffering and crucifixion looming on the horizon. During Lent this year we are considering some of Jesus' more puzzling parables, confounding stories that invite us to look at how the pieces of the kingdom fit together. Each week at the close of worship, you are invited to pick up another puzzle piece. All of the pieces are the same shape, so they all fit together. They will never form a fully finished picture, however. They—like we—will always be a work in progress, with bumps and uneven edges. So, you are invited to take a piece with you as you go, writing a word on it, if you choose, or coloring it with a marker or paint during the coming week, or simply connecting it to another piece and pondering what this week's puzzling parable has to say to you about this kingdom which has come near in Jesus Christ as we once again move together toward the cross.

This morning's text places us on the cusp of Holy Week. Everything we hear from Jesus for the rest of this season will be offered in days between that first Palm Sunday and Good Friday. As my friend and colleague Chris Tuttle notices, "This appears to be, in Matthew, Jesus' last public teaching. After this, he gathers his disciples close as they head into Jerusalem."¹ Just before Jesus tells this parable, he has a conversation with a rich young man who goes away sad

¹ Chris Tuttle in his paper for the Well, 2008

after Jesus tells him to sell all he has if he wishes to be perfect. Peter, dear Peter is exasperated.

[Read Matthew 19: 27-20:16]

In the midst of this high holy season comes another high—if not quite holy—season, at least for me and mine: March Madness. A week from tonight, brackets will be printed and seedings debated. Some bubbles will burst as Greg Gumbel reads the names of who's in and who's out of the men's tournament next Sunday evening. And other bubbles will float with joy and possibility, dreaming of being the 16th seed who topples Goliath, hoping against hope to be this year's Cinderella. We have been enthralled with the perseverance of St. Peters, Loyola-Chicago, and just a few years ago, that scrappy team with the babyface assassin from 16 miles away. Goodness, we love those Cinderellas, unless or until they knock our beloved team out of contention. We'll jump on the bandwagon and relish every story about the underrated coach and the overlooked point guard. We love the notion of the unknown, barely recruited everyman or everywoman, because it means someone like us has a shot at greatness, too.

And then Jesus has the audacity to tell this parable. I have had more than one congregation member blurt out to me over the years that they do not like this parable AT ALL. It begins harmlessly enough. A landowner goes into the marketplace looking for workers to help out in his vineyard. He negotiates an agreed upon wage with them and they get to work. The landowner returns to the marketplace later in the morning, sees more people and invites them to come work for him too. There's no negotiating this time; instead, the landowner tells them he will pay them what is right. There must be a lot of work to do in the vineyard, because the landowner returns at noon and at three sending whoever he discovers to work there, too. And then at five, he finds still more people waiting in the marketplace:

Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?

'Because nobody has hired us,' they replied.

He responded, 'You also go into the vineyard.'²

There is no bluster, no defensiveness. It's all very matter of fact. These workers are not off somewhere working simply because no one has hired them. I'm not sure I follow the logic of the workers or the landowner at this point. I honestly would have probably called it a day by now. What's done is done, or almost done, after all. But there is still work to be finished, and families to be fed. There are also grapes to be harvested, vines to be dressed, and so the landowner invites those last few workers, and they go, with no discussion of a wage at all.

And then, day is done. The Torah, Jewish law requires that day laborers be paid before sundown. Sundown is of course a photographer's favorite time of day, the golden hour, the fleeting moment when the sun's fading light casts a soft, warm glow on all it touches. I wonder if it's more than the light. I wonder if we smile differently in the sun's fading light. Do our shoulders relax more on the heels of a full day? Is there a sigh of relief knowing that our work is done, that rest is coming? In the parable, it is the golden hour in another way, too, of course, because it is the time when the workers line up to be paid. The landowner insists that the last to be hired get in line first. And to everyone's astonishment, those who worked in the vineyard for just an hour at the most receive a denarion, a full day's wage. Those who came before the dew had dried on the grape leaves line up next, fully expecting to be paid more. They worked more after all. They got to the marketplace before dawn, ready to work and eager to make a day's wage. And yet, they too receive a denarion, and they are outraged. As are we, more than

² Matthew 20: 6-7, Common English Bible

likely. This is not fair. The golden hour is tarnished. And the early birds grumble: “These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.”

To his credit, the landowner doesn’t dodge the uncomfortable conversation. He stays put and faces the grumbling ones. In fact, he turns toward one of the grumblers and calls him “friend.” Many have noticed a similarity between the father of the prodigal son and this landowner. There’s no real reprimand, no anger or defensiveness. Instead there is an invitation, a persuasive appeal to generosity and recognition that in the end both the early birds and the latecomers received not what they deserved, but what they needed, enough for one day. Enough to buy their daily bread. Enough to sustain, enough. There is no pecking order, no bonus for extra work.

My family will tell you that perhaps my most favorite part of March Madness is the montage that comes at the very end, with “One Shining Moment” as the soundtrack. The song was written by David Barrett and was supposed to debut after Super Bowl XXI in 1987. When CBS’s Super Bowl coverage ran long, the song and the accompanying montage were cut. So the song premiered instead at the end of March Madness that spring. It has played every year after the final buzzer, with the exception of 2020, when the tournament was canceled due to the pandemic.³ I can rarely stay awake for the “One Shining Moment” moment these days. I am a morning person, not a night owl, so I either doze off on the sofa and wake up to see it through bleary eyes, or I watch it the next day on my computer. I love seeing the last minute shots and the pure joy on the faces of the players. And like the mama bear that I tend to be, I want to hug

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Shining_Moment

all of the ones sitting dejected on the bench as their dreams for the season go unfulfilled. There is something magical and lovely about One Shining Moment. The hard work, the devotion to teammates, the care and guidance of good coaches, the joy of fans who drive great distances to see their team play on the big stage. Not everyone makes it to the final four, of course. Half of the teams do not even make it out of the first round. There are winners and losers and only one final champion. We don't like to be on the losing end of course. But we tell ourselves there's always next year. The ball doesn't always bounce our way, and we're ok with that in the end, because if we work hard enough, it just might.

The Golden Hour in this parable is not One Shining Moment, and perhaps that's why it frustrates us so. No, this parable is madness of the most disconcerting kind. It is not only the early birds who get a piece of the net; it is everyone. *Everyone*. This is beyond puzzling; it is scandalous. Someone really should pull Jesus aside and tell him how the game is played.

And yet this is Jesus' last time speaking publicly before he goes up to Jerusalem. He is urgently trying to teach the disciples and anyone within earshot what life in the kingdom of heaven, God's realm is like. Following today's passage, Jesus will tell the disciples one more time that the Son of Man is on a path toward arrest, ridicule, torture, and crucifixion. Time is short. He is not interested in playing by the larger world's rules. He has come to re-form all of creation, to invite all of humanity, early birds and latecomers, landowners and workers alike into a new renewed reality, a community guided by the gracious gift of the law, an ancient and life-giving covenant that we are often too eager to discard as an antiquated rulebook. In God's kingdom manna rains on all who are hungry. In God's vineyard, no one earns their living; our generous God chooses to give abundantly to everyone. And that's God's prerogative. Period.

I am quick to see myself as an early bird in this story. I can easily get caught up in my grumbling, keeping score, buried in my list of who does not deserve God's mercy or God's love. And then, by the grace of God, the sun's rays shine down on me as I hear Jesus inviting me—grumbling and grudging as I am—to this table, inviting me to share in this feast. His invitation comes as it always does not because of who I am, not because of anything I have done, not because of how hard I have worked, not because of how early I got here this morning, not because I have in any way earned it. No, this invitation comes because of who Jesus is, because he wants me here. He wants us all here. He wants everyone here. Our abundantly generous and faithfully persistent Savior longs for the day when we—workers and landowners, early birds and latecomers alike—will gather from north and south and east and west to sit at table together with him, not simply for one shining moment, but for a blessed and beautiful golden hour that does not end.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.