

Great Expectations

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 20:1-16

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Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When 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.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’ ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”



What do you expect? What do you expect of yourself? What do you expect of your life? What do you expect of others? What do you expect the world is going to give you? What do you expect from God? What do you expect?

One of the flaws that I have discovered in myself –after much introspection and therapy – is that I am often lulled into an expectation that “the system” will take care of me. Throughout my ministry career there have been times when I truly think the appointment system – the itinerant ministry that I committed myself to at my ordination – that that system where the Bishop, on the advice of the District Superintendent, after consultation with a church’s SPRC and the Pastor will take care of me and that I will be appointed to that perfect parish where my strengths will meet the congregation’s needs and where my weaknesses are overcome by gifted lay leadership. A “perfect” relationship. My great expectation – the system will work in my favor.

I guess the fault is in my belief that someone out there – someone else is going to take care of me, will have only my best interests in mind, and will be able to see as clearly as I do what God is calling me to be and do.

And then what happens? Disappointment. Political complications. Financial decisions. Practical necessities of this often clumsy and awkward system that we United Methodists have created and live with. I can’t tell you how many times – despite that fact that I *know better* I get lulled back into that place and my expectations, grandiose at times no doubt, get crushed by decisions made around me *without* my best interests in mind.

I hope that doesn’t sound like whining. But maybe it is, a bit. Wouldn’t it be nice if all of our expectations were fulfilled all of the time?

Great expectations. We all have them. Expectations that sometimes get satisfied, sometimes get acted on, but probably more often fail to be met. So Jesus offers us this parable.

A landowner goes out to his field early in the morning – at daybreak, let’s say, 6 am, when it’s cool enough to work without getting overheated in the sun of a typical day in 1st Century

Galilee. He hires laborers and offers them a fair day's wage for their work. No doubt they're appreciative for the work so they can feed their families. Their expectations are that they'll get paid from when the sun appears until the end of the day when the sun disappears. Great expectations.

Then, about 9 am, the landowner finds some other workers hanging out in the Walmart parking lot, looking fit and capable of working the vineyards. So he hires them as well. At 9 am he sends them to work promising that he will pay them fairly for their work. At Noon the same happens – hanging outside the Wawa he finds some other workers lounging around – he promises them pay and sends them out into the fields. And again at 3 pm and at 5 pm he finds workers in the same situation. “Why aren't you working?,” he asks. “Well, no one has hired us.” “Okay, you're hired, go to my vineyard and I'll pay you to work for me.”

What expectations do these workers have? They expect to get paid. The 6 am workers were promised a fair day's wage. The 9 am workers were promised a fair wage. The Noon, and 3 pm and 5 pm were told the same. We might guess that those hired at Noon or 3 or 5 expected less than those hired earlier. And we can probably also assume that the 6 am folks, as they saw the others come into the vineyard, expected that they were getting considerably more than these latecomers.

But what happens? The landowner pays each worker the same amount – a day's wages – \$100 let's say. Those who came in late – 5 pm and 3 pm – are paid first – \$100 each. The Noon and 9 am workers – \$100 each – they each look into their hands, “Wow, I didn't expect that.” The 6 am laborers, tired and sweaty, worn out from 10 or 12 hours of work are last in line – \$100 each – the fair wage they were promised.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, there Mr. Landowner. Umm, we worked longer, *hours* longer, than those lazy guys who were sitting around in the market all morning. Don't you think we deserve more?”

The union shop-steward gets a phone call and rushes down to the job site to intervene. Not much she can do for them is there? They expected to get paid a day's pay – that was the deal from the beginning of the day – that was the great expectation for the 6 am shift. They didn't get cheated. They, in fact, received exactly what they expected, they got exactly what they worked for, they were treated fairly and equally by this landowner who cared for each one of those workers no matter how long they worked.

That is what the kingdom is like, says Jesus, what God's reign in our lives in the present and in the future will be like. Your expectations will be met if you are part of that kingdom at 6 am or at 5 pm. God welcomes each of us whenever we figure that out, wherever we are, whatever our doubts might be, and however we present ourselves before God asking for mercy.

That's all it's about. Like the man born blind who Jesus encounters and asks, “What is it you would have me do for you?” “Have mercy on me,” the man replies. I have a feeling that's what this is all about. In fact I'm living like that's Gospel reality – that when it all comes down to it all I have left is the opportunity to be in God's presence and to plead, “Have mercy on me” and God will oblige. Expectations. In at 6 am, in at 5 pm – your expectations should be the same.

The Protestant work ethic just rolled over in its grave, huh? This is so not what we've been taught by our beloved American capitalism. We've been taught that the harder we work – or the longer we work – the more we'll be compensated.

I do not know anyone who has gotten to the top without hard work. That is the recipe. It will not always get you to the top, but it will get you pretty near. ~ Margaret Thatcher

There is no substitute for hard work. ~ Thomas Alva Edison

Unless you are willing to drench yourself in your work beyond the capacity of the average [person], you are just not cut out for positions at the top. ~ J.C. Penney

I'm not sure the disciples really got Jesus' message here. True, the earliest Jesus followers seemed to know that the best way to live was by sharing all things in common – that's what the Book of Acts tells us. They made sure everyone had what they needed. There's evidence that early Christian communities included wealthy and poor people together and they tried their best to figure out how to care for each other. That's the Pentecost story – the first moments of what we now call the Church:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. (Acts 2: 43-47)

Yet then, Paul (or someone writing as if Paul) wrote to the Christian communities in Thessalonica just a few decades later (2 Thessalonians 3: 7-12):

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we

were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

“For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” That doesn't sound like the parable does it?

God's grace, Jesus reminds us, is positively, absolutely free and it's yours to receive if you're at the top of the heap or the bottom. So don't worry about it.

The scandal of this parable is that we are all equal recipients of God's gifts. The scandal of our faith is that we are often covetous and jealous when God's gifts of forgiveness and life are given to others in equal measure. (Karl Jacobson at Workingpreacher.org)

I think it's kind of funny that when we read this parable – at least when I do – I assume that I'm one of the ones that's going to feel slighted. You? When I read it I feel indignant, “Hey. Whaddya mean she gets the same as me? I worked harder and longer.” Do you read it like that? We assume that we're the ones getting cheated out of the landowner's gift here.

But on second read, maybe I'm one of “the least, the last, the lost,” maybe I'm one of those guys hanging out at Wawa at 3 pm just hoping a job will be dumped in my lap. Because, Lord knows, I haven't seen very many 6 am sunrises! So what if I am one of those in at 3 or 5 pm? God's grace is just as available to me as it is to the early birds. Then the story's not so bad, huh? I worked an hour

and received enough to feed my family and pay the mortgage for another week.

That's the other piece of the parable. It's not necessarily an indictment of the 6 am complainers or permission to be a 5 pm slacker. The question that we're left with is: what happens the next day? The Jesus message leaves us dangling at the end. It seems to me that another point here is that the late workers will be so grateful for the free gift that they will want to repay the landowner by showing up for work again tomorrow.

Again, capitalism rolls over in its grave where Jesus has buried it. The work ethic by which we all live tells us that if we can get more for less work, we should take the deal because then it frees you up to use that extra time to make even more somewhere else. If I know I can show up at 5 pm and get \$100, then I can double-dip by working the early shift at the widget factory down the street from 6 am to 4 pm for \$100. Sweet.

Well, maybe God is hoping that you are so grateful and filled with free grace that those extra 8 hours are spent in prayer or working a soup kitchen or playing with you children or helping old ladies across the street. Or maybe even bringing peace into your neighborhood working in a restorative justice program or knocking on legislators doors reminding them that we're supposed to care for each other rather than try to hold the other down or pushing past your comfort zone to go where no one looks like you or has what you have just to be present in someone else's life.

A writer in Christian Century summarized it like this: "Maybe Jesus is saying ... Throw yourself into what you love or simply what you do. Let God sort out the rest. It's not your problem, and that's a gift unto itself. And if you should happen to find yourself on the wanting end of what's deserved, God's loving hand extended

is gift indeed." (Kristen Swenson Christian Century). Interesting, huh?

I have a tendency to think that everything is about me. And rightly so, right! How about you? But everything's *not* about us is it? Everything is about God's reign and whether or not we welcome it or brush it aside. Everything's about not worrying about what you're going to get out of what you do in the world – it's simply about doing it because you are thankful for all God provides.

Do I wish I was Marc McDonald? Maybe ... sometimes. I read an article recently about Marc whose employee badge reads #00001. In the business world of startup companies, employees who are hired first typically reap the greatest profits, often in the form of stock options that skyrocket in value when the company goes public. People hired last, on the other hand, earn much less. This business model worked well for Marc McDonald who, as Microsoft's first employee in 1974, wears that coveted badge number. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2011, Microsoft reported record revenue of \$69.94 billion, a 12% increase from the prior year. My guess is Marc takes home a nice paycheck in addition to the investment income from his stock options.

But you know what? The point of Jesus' parable is not that "the one who dies with the most toys wins." The point of the parable is that you have from God as much as Microsoft employee #00001 – money plays no part in the promise – grace plays the number one role in God's kingdom. And you have that grace right there in front of you. Does employee #00001 use his earnings to feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for the sick and imprisoned? I hope so, but it just shouldn't matter to me. What should matter is am I feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, serving others, ensuring God's call to justice is being met in my world, sharing with those around me what a beautiful (and free!) gift God's grace is to me.

Bible scholar, Ched Myers, writes often about “Sabbath economics.” In Jesus’ economics, which is the economic system represented in this parable by the generous landowner, all workers received the pay they needed in order to survive, even if it seemed unfair to those who had worked all day. Sabbath economics is Jesus economics, says Ched Myers, Sabbath economics is about the grace of receiving what the Creator gives and the responsibility not to take more than is needed. Wide gaps between rich and poor are not part of God’s plan, and God’s people are called to be part of God’s generosity so that all have enough on which to live.

We’re back today from our more relaxed summer mode, back into our typical church schedule and routine. I love the image of this Sunday as Homecoming Sunday because it reminds me that this congregation – or wherever I find myself parked for however God wants me there – is something of a home to me, and to each of us. Here is the place where we can look around and know that others are on similar journeys of asking and receiving and questioning and doubting and getting answers and affirmations. Home – this congregation in the community – is that place in our lives where we can say how grateful we are for God’s grace and where we can act out our thanks by responding to God’s call to the greatest as well as the least.

Welcome home. Don’t worry about whether you’re the 6 am worker or the 5 pm worker. It really doesn’t matter. Focus rather on giving thanks for God’s gifts.

Let’s just get started again ... or better yet, let’s continue what we’ve been working on for the past 2,000 years.

Amen.