

What would you do if you won a Lottery?  
Matthew 20:1-16  
Dr. Alan H. Landes  
Crestview Presbyterian Church  
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Have you always got what you thought was coming to you? I thought about that while reading through the small print in one of the service contracts I recently signed. I think that because something is written on a contract that it ought to be included, and for some reason- now the other party doesn't want to include that particular item. I don't really understand why- but somehow I think I ought to get what I was promised.

This is Labor Day weekend, and we can see some of the same sort of gotta-get what's-coming-to-us thinking in the labor negotiations taking place between the City of Cincinnati and various city employee labor organizations. The unions came to the table with the sense that they ought to get what's due them. Labor unions were first formed with that in mind, and for many years- they've done an admirable job in helping workers receive a fair wage for fair work. Labor Day holiday has come more to mark the end of summer than a remembrance of past Labor victories... and I think we are the better for the work unions have done- regardless of how you feel about them now.

So... let's take a look at this labor union parable Jesus tells, and see what you think about it. Some labor unions might be troubled by this morning's story; certainly the participants were... listen to this: (READ Matthew 20:1-16- The Message)

How about that? What's fair about that? Which person do you identify with in this story? How many of you would have been right with that man protesting that we should have gotten more than those first paid? Yet- at the same time, all were paid

exactly what was promised to them. What's that about, anyway? Or, do identify with the others in the story? If you were one of the last hired- you have felt like your ticket was a winner!

I think this parable- one which Montefiore named as among the greatest and most glorious of all- tells us something essential about God. Jesus is giving to us an exalted picture of God that's somewhat different from what we tend to live by, and teaches us something important about the nature of God. What Jesus is trying to tell us is that God's employment policy- God's way of including us- isn't based on our merit... not on how hard or long we have worked- but rather functions by grace. Almost every writer I looked at linked this parable with the Parable of the Prodigal Son- or the Parable of the Loving Father, as some people put it. That's a story about a father who didn't punish his wayward son by giving him what he deserved- punishment, shame, abandonment- but rather threw a welcome-home party for him instead- much to the consternation of the boy's righteous older brother. There is something about the love God that doesn't give us what we really deserve, but rather something much more.

This morning's story itself comes right out of the employment practices of the day. During the growing season, a grape grower would need to gather in the crop quickly. Rain could ruin it, and an insect infestation destroy it. When the time came, the grower would head for the village square to hire day laborers. When I lived in California, there were often migrant workers hanging out on specific street corners, hoping for some work. That's what these folks were. Then, as now, those who found work under such circumstances were often impoverished and living day to day on whatever could be scrounged.

If you think that's not us- United Way statistics tell a different story. (show slides 1) Yesterday's headlines told us that 9.7% of us are unemployed- it's nearly 11% in Butler County and most of us know someone who's out of work somewhere- like my son. (slide 2) With median income here now down to about \$53,000, about 11% of Butler County is living in poverty; (slide 3) in April, there were 3000 children who received welfare assistance. (slide 4) Last year, 69,000 families used a food pantry, and (slide 5) 460,000 soup kitchen meals were served in Butler County in 2008- and the pace is up substantially in 2009. (close slides) When I look around West Chester and Liberty Township and Mason... that's hard to believe... but that's what the numbers tell us; talk to the staff at Adena and Shawnee Elementary schools- they see it every day. As Christians concerned about the hungry, the needy and the poor among us... we need to give those numbers some careful thought.

In Jesus' parable- those who were among the last to be hired had been standing around all day, looking for work. To get even a fraction of a day's wage- not very much to begin with- would scarcely feed their families. For them to get a whole day's wage... they probably weren't concerned about whether it was fair or not... to get a full day's wage meant that they could buy some milk on the way home from work. What a blessing... they **didn't** get what they expected!

That's what Jesus is trying to tell us... that God's way is to give more than we deserve. There are some- good church folks, I'm sure- who may well feel that they should get a little extra blessing because they've been so faithful, so good, so righteous. Too often, we look at those around us, and inwardly feel that those people should just work a little harder... show up a little earlier... pull themselves up by their own

bootstraps... but folks- that's not God's way. In speaking with those who complained about giving the same blessings to the last hired, the estate manager responds, "Are you going to get stingy-" the Good News Bible translates the Greek literally- "Is your evil eye because I'm generous?" Brothers and sisters- that's not the way God dealt with us! Truth is- none of us got from God what we deserve... and Jesus doesn't dismiss good faith efforts- like the older brother in the prodigal son parable- rather he lifts the needy up to the same level. That's grace!

The way we often say verse 16 is that the first shall be last and the last shall be first; Peterson puts it this way: "Here it is again- the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last and the last first." I hope you hear that as good news; those among us who feel as if we deserve God's judgment rather than God's mercy; those who know the need of something special just to make it, and feel the pinch of emotional or psychological or relational or economic poverty- God wants to make up the difference. God's economy is something much different than our own, and the benefits of Christ can more than make up the deficit.

There's something special in today's parable that I'm not sure we all heard... and it's this: the estate manager- representing God- was out looking for workers. I think that should give hope to any here who are unemployed... God is looking for you, and some sort of blessing is on the way. He was in the marketplace early in the morning, again at mid-day, and yet again late in the afternoon- so hang in there and don't give up! He was out looking for people, and I believe he is still out looking for folks... looking to bless them with something more significant than a dollar or two.....

That's what I hope our Adventure of faith can accomplish... we want others to know this Grace-of-God Lottery... that we know that God has given us far more than we deserve- and we want to share it with others. We want to search them out, and do something for them that communicates how very much God cares for us all. God is sending **us** out into the marketplace, and we have some good news for anyone who will listen- and I hope you're doing what you can!

That kind of over-the-top grace is what this table means to communicate. God seeks us out, and in the same way that the Loving Father was watching for the prodigal son, the Estate Manager wants to welcome you to this table. There's not much you can do to earn your way here; you can't work hard or long enough to gain this blessing. All you can do is receive it as a gift... as something other than what you deserve... something other than judgment or blame or shame... this is love- God's love made ours in Jesus Christ.

It's an amazing grace, to be sure... but it yours, and its mine... thank God!