

March 17, 2019  
**The Last Shall Be the Same**  
Annette Hill Briggs  
Matthew 20:1-16

*20 “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 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.”*

I've had my nails done twice a month by the same person for years. She's fewer than ten years younger than me. She works seven days a week, ten hours a day on six days of the week, six hours every Sunday. So does her husband, who also works at the same salon. They have a sixth-grade daughter. Every other year she takes a month off to visit her parents in Vietnam. Every other trip (every four years), the whole family – three people – can go. For the past several months she has been in treatment for breast cancer. She had another surgery on Thursday and was at work yesterday.

I tell you this, to remind ourselves that in this economy most of us showed up last and got paid first. And yet, when we hear it read out loud, with whom do we most identify? If you aren't sure, then say out loud right now the thought that first comes to mind: Some worked all day, some worked an hour. “Wow, that is so not . . . FAIR?” And there it is. The granddaddy of all bad words: FFFFFFFFAIR. We read it as if we work 67 manual labor hours a week. As if we are the ones breaking our backs for minimum wage. As if we've

earned everything we call our own. Maybe today we could take another listen and see what else might ring true.

Let's pray. *We have so much – most of all privilege and opportunity. May our gratitude take the shape of generosity – of spirit and material things too.*

This parable starts out much like the one last week: Jesus gives a teaching the disciples don't understand. Then Peter, having never heard the saying, *Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt*, pipes up as their spokesman. In this case, Jesus has been talking about the difficulty rich people have in the kingdom of God. The disciples are dismayed by this, since they had always been taught that being rich was a sign of God's preference. To their dismay, Jesus says, *"I know, right? But what is impossible for humans is possible for God."* And Peter says, *"Okay look, we have left everything and followed you. What, then, will we have?"* – Peter's version of *"Hey, that's not fair!"*

It just makes me cringy – like some episodes of *The Office*, when Michael Scott is especially clueless – 'cause you know Jesus is about to dog him with something painful. And then we end up realizing we are just as confused and clueless as the disciples and as cringy as Peter. A landowner needs grape pickers. Backbreaking work, which is why I picked this photo for our bulletin cover. At the Oliver vineyards, the pickers don't have to carry them like this; tractors pull carts through the rows. I doubt Palestinian pickers use those even now.

You know the details: the landowner hired workers at four different times throughout the day. At evening when it was time to pay, he first paid the ones who'd come to work last. Paid them the same as he'd promised to pay the ones he'd hired first. We aren't given to know what the 12 noon and three o'clock shifts got. I assume the same – a denarius, 20 cents, enough to feed a family for a day. The ones with tenure quickly do the math, they will get \$2.40! More than a week of groceries!!

Turns out, no. They got what they negotiated – 20 cents. *And when they received it*, what do these lucky workers do? *Grumble*, the Bible says. *They grumbled against the landowner, 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."* Isn't that just like the labor class? Agree to certain terms, then *grumble* about it later? They weren't grumbling when they thought they'd get paid more.

But now that they are getting what they were told they'd get, suddenly it seems like so much less. Now the economics of this are real. Should the landowner pay whatever he wants to his pickers? Is that what we believe? But now that they are getting the same as

the one-hour workers, it feels wrong, unjust. Why? Take the money out of it. Now, why? For no other reason than that people they think less of are being paid the same as them. And they cannot stand it. *You have made them equal to us.*

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, the cross. *We have left everything*, Peter thinks, the way recent college graduates think they worked hard in college. He hasn't. But he will. Sit with that a minute. Or a year. *You have made them equal to us.* Who do you want not made equal to yourself? White supremacists? Because if the story hits us as, "*Wow, that is so not fair that the people who hardly worked got paid as much as the ones who worked all day,*" then, friends, there has got to be someone.

In that first story I told, about Than (not her real name) – I suspect her reaction to this story would also be, "Wow that's not fair!" since she lives this story every time I waltz in there for my little "Me Time." We chat about our families and cooking, but I'm under no illusions who I am to her. She calls me *Ahn*, but *Bread and butter* might as well be my name.

Like last week's parable, Jesus chooses money to teach us the math of grace, the currency that can't be earned. *You'll never give up enough to earn it, Peter, but if you will listen to what I'm telling you and watch what I am showing you, you might just learn to trade in it this side of heaven.* What is it that Jesus needs us to hear? Let's start again. The landowner hired four crews that day. Assuming the work day was twelve hours (grape harvest season in Galilee June/July), Crew One worked twelve hours, Crew Two worked six hours, Crew Three worked three hours, and Crew Four worked one hour. Everyone got their twenty cents.

Save the landowner, all of those workers were unemployed when they got out of bed that morning. Yet by 6 PM, Crew One had promoted themselves to shareholders! They aren't jealous of Crew Four, are they? Of whom are they jealous? It says plainly in verse 15. *Are you jealous because I am generous?* They're jealous of the landowner, of his power to decide who gets what.

Peter doesn't want Jesus to decide what Peter gets. Peter wants to decide what Peter gets. But not just Peter – everyone else too. I think like I'm Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. I know what should be done to everyone about everything! Just like I love being generous. It makes me feel wonderful to be generous, to tip, to help, to share. I'm not bragging, I'm confessing. Because the generous one is the one who *has* and the one who decides *who gets* what I have. To be generous is to be powerful, even if that generosity is well meant and comes from a desire to love Jesus. To love being generous is also to covet, in some way, power over other people that doesn't belong to me. Or us. Crew One says, *you have made them equal to us.* Wow, does that sting!

For all our talk about equality and justice, wow, does that sting! It stings me that my first reaction to this story is not, "*How awesome that the latecomers got to feed their kids the next day too!*" But even more, it stings that it has taken so long to understand, "*Wow, I AM one of the latecomers.*" This parable is first and foremost for Peter and his brothers, who for all their *grumbling* would have nothing were it not for Jesus having come along and found them when they were day-laboring fishermen. And it is for us, who can claim no better apart from the grace of God.

Not one of us got here by ourselves, amen? Most of us get way more credit than we deserve. Amen? Any of you ever say to yourselves, *if these people knew what a hack I am at this?* The hardest thing about the parable may not be that "the last shall be first," but rather, at the end of the day the last and the first are exactly the same. And our task is to learn to live, to walk and to talk, to ourselves and one another, convinced it's true.

Would you pray with me?