

Last or First?

Matthew 20.1-16

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Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC

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I am reading and preaching this morning from Old Town in Fort Collins, CO. We are recording this scripture and sermon in Old Firehouse Alley, just around the corner from boutiques and cafes and shops and restaurants such as LuLu Lemon, Old Firehouse Books, Starbucks, Art Space and Spaces, co-office space. Consider this setting as you hear our text for the day.

1"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2**After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, [a typical day's wage], he sent them into his vineyard. **3**"Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. **4**He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I'll pay you whatever is right.' **5**And they went. "Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. **6**Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?' **7**"'Because nobody has hired us,' they replied. "He responded, 'You also go into the vineyard.' **8**"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.' **9**When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. **10**Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. **11**When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, **12**'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.' **13**"But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarion? **14** Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. **15** Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?' **16** So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last."

(For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God within us, for the Word of God among us....thanks be to God.)

This is an odd story, isn't it? Any sane business person in any of these good businesses here would say...BAD business practice! We pay for hours worked! How will we maintain our profits if we pay for hours Not worked? That's crazy! And how can that motivate workers to do their best when some get paid the same for Less work? Ridiculous!" And just ask kid ... they will tell you..."*That's not fair!!*" We all like to be first, like to find the best parking space in the lot, get the best grades, win the race, get the job, the promotion, the raise in wages or allowance. And sometimes someone else gets the parking space, the best grade, the job or the promotion or the raise, and wins the race. It doesn't always feel

fair! NO one wants to be less than or last, right? Even if Jesus says being last means being first? What's up?

What is Jesus up to here? If we take a look at the chapter before our story, Matthew Chapter 19, we get some clues...Jesus is teaching the crowds as well as his disciples about God's sense of fairness and justice and grace. All kinds of people are asking him questions. Some like the Pharisees are trying to trick him into what they think are wrong answers. The children want to ask questions too, but the disciples try to shoo them away. And you know what Jesus says! "Let them come to me! I love their questions. I love them! They are the essence of God's realm, God's community here and now! If you want understand God and God's community, be like a child. Come on, kids! Let's talk!"

Then a rich, young man comes to ask "How do I achieve (interesting word choice, note it! – achieve) eternal life, life with God?" Jesus says, "Keep the commandments you have been taught all your life in the scriptures!" "Well, I have and I do! But, am I missing anything else I should be doing?" Jesus says 'If you want to be complete, (not successful or highest achieving, first, but complete/whole), go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven, i.e. God's realm which is also here on earth. And come follow me.' But when the young man heard this, he went away saddened, because he had many possessions."ⁱ

Wow! Don't you think that all the crowds and disciples were astonished! Jesus told this rich, young, scripturally educated, obviously successful man to essentially go to the end of the line. Be with the last and not the first in society. And it was too hard. No one wants to be last. Now the disciples have SO many questions! What does Jesus say? That really excruciating, annoying thing we hear so often quoted, "I assure you that it will be very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom."ⁱⁱ "Then who can be saved!?", they all practically scream. Aren't the rich blessed by God, in God's favor? Who gets to be part of God's blessed, God's in crowd? God's good guys!

"Jesus looked at them carefully and said, "It's impossible for human beings. But all things are possible for God."ⁱⁱⁱ Oh, thanks, Jesus! That really clears things up!! And Peter says, what many of the disciples were thinking and maybe many of us..."We HAVE left everything to follow you! Are we saved? Will God bless us? What do we get in the end?" Jesus says, "All who have left everything to follow me *will* have eternal life, meaningful life in God's realm here, now and yet to come which is heaven. "Remember, 'many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first.'"^{iv}

Then Jesus tells them the story we just heard together...."*The kingdom of heaven, God's realm now and yet to come, is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard....*" And he tells about the workers the vineyard owner hired to work from dawn to dusk, the ones hired to work from 9 am to dusk, and those from noon to dusk, and those from 3 pm to dusk, and finally the ones sent to work at 5 pm to dusk. AND they are all paid the SAME at the end of the day! *No Way! No Fair!* Yet Jesus tells the disciples (and us) that the vineyard owner says to those who worked all day and are now protesting the discrepancy in hours and pay, "I have paid you a fair day's wages. I paid what I said I would. It's my money, my vineyard, can I not pay what and as and who I will? Why are you giving me the evil eye? Why are you resentful of those who worked less hours? Because I am generous with what is mine? Remember, those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last."

There it is again... last or first? Do we want to be last or first? Jesus just turned everything on its head. If we want to be first....do we have to sneak to the back of the line and be last? And what does that even mean? Stop doing our best as workers in the vineyard? If we understand God as the vineyard owner in the story, do we stop doing our best in God's vineyard? Work less hours? We get paid the same anyway. Play around all our lives, get rich, live large and selfishly, then come to God in a deathbed confession? Be saved at the last hour. We would be last to the vineyard, so therefore we would be first in God's realm?

I'm talking nonsense now and you know it....still it is important for us to really think about this Last/First stuff....Hmmm...Does God's realm of heaven on earth operate in a linear line? In a chronological sequence? First to last. Does it operate as a hierarchy, upper to lower tiers, of income, of education, of class status, of race, of gender, of sexual orientation? OR does God's realm work more like an ever- expanding circle where all are included and there is no start or finish line, no higher or lower, no first or last? And if we really internalize this image of the realm of God as circle how are we changed in our lives here and now?

Let's take a walk here in Fort Collins' beloved Old Town, our wonderful downtown....some of you may be listening in Windsor or Wellington, Loveland or Greeley and you have lovely "downtown" areas as well...maybe you have lived in Denver and know that downtown...or another big city or small town. We have many wonderful locally owned stores and cafes and restaurants and coffee shops in beautiful old buildings here in Fort Collins. And the city has worked hard over many years to make this place financially thriving, aesthetically pleasing, welcoming to all. Yet a cup of coffee here is likely to cost more than the one at the 7/11 that's not in this lovely area. I doubt that everyone in Fort Collins can afford to buy a cup of coffee here or sit in the cafes or buy their clothes at the local boutiques.

Right around the corner from all this good life is this beautiful building – the Fort Collins' Rescue Mission, a non-denominational Christian-based organization that is changing lives everyday *by being in relationship* with those who are homeless and need food, water and/or shelter...with those who need help with addiction and with recreating, healing, the brokenness in their lives. The folks who are welcomed into this beautiful building (which doesn't really look like the beautifully restored vintage buildings in Old Town) probably can't buy a cup of coffee around the corner at this point in their lives. We could say they might be the workers who get hired late in the day, if at all. Those of you who have been around Fort Collins awhile know that the folks who run Fort Collins' Rescue Mission differ theologically and in some social justice values from Plymouth. Still they are workers in the same vineyard, God's vineyard, as we are. And we work with other agencies in this Old Town area such as La Familia and La Cocina and Neighbor to Neighbor at the Murphy Center. Perhaps you can picture one of those buildings and their communities as well.

Did we just travel from first to last as we moved around the corner? From one social class "down" to another that those of us who are in the more upwardly mobile classes are supposed to help "fix" because we want to do good things in God's eyes like the rich young man? Is that how God's realm of justice and love here and now and yet to come really works? Hmmm.....

OR what if there are no levels or linear or even chronological arrangement in the wide circle of God's Generosity and Grace, both with capital Gs? What if there is really no last or first? What if we all just God's Beloveds? Beloved with a capital B. Living as workers in God's vineyard. And the length of time we work in the vineyard, joyful work given by virtue of being God's beloved, is not the issue because God's Abundance, with a capital A, is not given out by who comes first or last or in between. God's Abundance IS Always and is always Enough. Always Plenty! Like the manna sent by God to feed God's people on the wilderness journey to the Promised Land. There is always plenty and enough for the day's journey. And if you try to take too much or hoard it, it rots and grows worms.

A very quick search on the internet showed me that a study in 2018 generated by the United Nations revealed that there is one and a half times enough food produced in the world to feed the world's current population in that year. So why are people starving? Because we human beings insist on playing by the last and first rules! We insist on scarcity and hoarding. And because of that our relationships are often rotten.

Jesus tells us that God does not play by first and last rules!! God is Abundance, is Generosity, is Grace. We are God's Beloveds. There IS enough for all. If we stop with the scarcity, first/last, up/down, in or out, better or worse rules and know we are embraced in the ever-widening circle of God, of Love. This is not a pie in the sky ideal, this is Real Life. If there is no first or last then there is sharing all around and plenty. I suspect the folks who embrace one another here in this beautiful building, those who are welcoming and those who are welcomed, know this to be true. I suspect we do too. How will we use this wonderful knowing as neighbors and business people, and children and youth and students and teachers? And voters?

In Jesus' story, wages were used not to create distinctions between people, but to express equality and solidarity. 20th century Catholic social justice activist and journalist, Dorothy Day, wrote about this story, "[Jesus] spoke of the *living wage*, not equal pay for equal work, in the parable of those who came first and those who came at the eleventh hour."^v Hmm... a living wage. What if we all....all of God's Beloveds...that would be all of us... all human beings...received a living wage of resources and finances and work opportunities and most importantly, of Joy and Meaning and Love? How do we make that happen relationally, socially, politically, in God's realm, heaven on earth, here and now and yet to come? If we work with God together in the vineyard of justice and love, will all our buildings be as beautiful as the Fort Collin's Rescue Mission because of the relationships inside? May it be so. Amen.

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ⁱ Bible, Common English. CEB Common English Bible with Apocrypha - eBook [ePub] (Kindle Locations 38628-38630). Common English Bible. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Bible, Common English. CEB Common English Bible with Apocrypha - eBook [ePub] (Kindle Locations 38631-38633). Common English Bible. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bible, Common English. CEB Common English Bible with Apocrypha - eBook [ePub] (Kindle Locations 38634-38635). Common English Bible. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Bible, Common English. CEB Common English Bible with Apocrypha - eBook [ePub] (Kindle Location 38640). Common English Bible. Kindle Edition.

^v *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Words, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David J. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Westminster John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 2013, 95).