

THE MANY ENDINGS OF A STORY

Matthew 20:1-16

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 21, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 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?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, 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." 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? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

In the early 1980s, I took a group of about twenty senior highs all the way from west Texas to the Montreat Youth Conference in North Carolina, a destination to which our youth are familiar as well. Because I was neither as experienced nor conscientious as our Associate Pastor, Patrick Hunnicutt, who is on a retreat with Senior Highs this weekend, I spent a lot of time outside on the grounds of Montreat – reading – while the youth and other adults were inside at the conference.

Though derelict in my role as minister to youth, at least what I was reading was worthwhile. I was captivated by fresh scholarship of the day about the parables of Jesus, those short, pithy narratives most of us know if we have hung around the church any length of time: "The Parable of the Prodigal Son,"¹ "The Parable of the Good Samaritan,"² "The Parable of the Talents."³

What energized me in those early days of ministry still energizes me nearly three decades later – the unending capacity of parables to surprise us, and, in some instances, to shake us out of our normal moral universe, our deeply held sense of what is right and what is wrong; sometimes even to shake us out of our sense of entitlement.

- For example, in The Parable of the Prodigal Son, should the father really run after the returning prodigal, put a ring on his finger and a shoes on his feet, and throw the most lavish party the village has seen in years, while his older son, who never left home, is still in the field working the two jobs he has had to work since his younger brother left? What kind of moral universe condones such "non-probationary" acceptance on the part of the father?
- Likewise, especially in light of this week's economic developments, should, in The Parable of the Talents, Jesus really have prescribed taking the one talent man and throwing him "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," simply because he had "dug a hole in the ground and hid" the one talent he had received rather than "invested it with bankers"? Again, what kind of moral universe praises wild-eyed speculators and condemns the cautious and prudent?

Such reversal is even more resounding in The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Let me tell this story a bit loosely: A landowner goes out early in the morning, probably 6:00 a.m., to hire labourers for his vineyard.

He looks around the market place and finds some ready to work.

"I'll pay you a full day's wage for a full day's work," he says, and they go into his fields to work.

¹ Luke 15:11-32.

² Luke 10:25-37.

³ Lesson 25:14-30.

About nine o'clock, the landowner goes into the market again, sees others, says to them: "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right."

He does the same thing at noon and at three o'clock.

At five o'clock he goes out again and finds more workers idle.

"Why are you standing here?" he asks.

"Because no one has hired us."

"You go out into the vineyard too." And they go.

~

When evening comes, two or three hours later, the landowner says to his manager: "Call the laborers, give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first."

Those hired at 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon, standing at the head of the line, receive a full day's pay.

Those who had been working since 6:00 a.m. watch this generous drama unfold from the back of the line. Undoubtedly, as they inch closer to the front, they assume that they are going to be paid four or five day's worth of pay for their one day's work.

But when they arrive at the payment desk, they receive one day's pay for their one day's work.

As you know, I love the language of the Bible. The parable crafter – who happens to be Jesus – tells us that these all-day workers "grumble." Another translation is "murmur," like the people of Israel when they were freed from slavery but suddenly found themselves short on food and water.⁴

Can you imagine what precise words the workers used to give voice to their grumbling? It wasn't the words from the vocabulary flash cards we used in elementary school. "Grumble." "Murmur." "The Greek is *gogguzo*."

After they cease their vocabulary of grumbling, the workers revert to English (I mean Aramaic).

These last worked only one hour [they say],
and you have made them equal to us
who have borne the burden of the day
and the scorching heat.

I suppose it is a human tendency to judge who we are by what we make or what we produce or what we have: "You have made them *equal* to us..." "*Gogguzo*."

Now the landowner gives multiple responses to their grumbling:

Friend [he says], I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?

This is the answer of contract law. An agreement is inviolate no matter what other agreements are entered into under similar circumstances by similar people, even if these latter agreements are vastly different.

Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?

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But the landowner doesn't stop with contract law. He also moves on to property rights.

⁴ See Exodus 15:24ff.

Take what belongs to you and go [he says]. I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

I suppose in every society those who have the goodies have the upper hand: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”

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But then the landowner changes the subject from *his* rights and *his* power to the all-day worker’s *perceptions*.

Or is it really the case [he asks] that you are envious because I am generous?

A more literal translation reads: “Is your eye evil because I am good?” “When something good happens to someone else when it hasn’t happened to you, is your eye evil?”

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When Jesus tells the parable, this is where it ends. If you notice the placement of quotation marks in the text, you can see that Matthew, the gospel writer, adds the next statement – “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Matthew may have wanted to soften the last of these multiple endings Jesus furnishes: “Is your eye evil because I am good? Are you envious because I am generous?”.

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So I’m sitting there, under the tree at Montreat, reading a terrific book on this parable.⁵ No telling where the Senior Highs are....and I start to think about this last ending: “Is your eye evil because I am good?”

The trip to Montreat was in early August. 1982.

A week before the trip, I had learned that the marriage I had entered a few years earlier in seminary was ending.

I was worried.

- How could I still be a minister?
- Was there something wrong with me?

Two days before the trip I had gotten up at 6:00 a.m. to work in the small yard of the small house we had started buying to get it ready for the realtors to sell.

It was 110 degrees that day, not unusual in West Texas, but I barely noticed.

About 6:00 p.m. I was still working. I noticed a long, white sedan float slowly up the street in front of my house. Do you remember how long cars used to be in the early 1980s? And they did float.

- In the front seat was a distinguished-looking older couple.
- In back seat were the young, sleek, golden-throated minister of the First Baptist Church, and his beautiful wife.
- 2000-member church he had.
- Just a few years older than me.
- I could virtually smell the perfume coming through the tightly-sealed windows.
- I dropped my rake and went inside.

A few weeks later, as I sat under the tree in Montreat, readings these multiple endings to this parable, this scene raced back into my mind with a convicting chill as I read the last ending:

“Larry,”
The parable whispered...

“Larry,”
The parable seemed to speak...

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), 111-119.

“Larry,”
The voice of God called out:
“Are you envious
Because I am generous
To someone else?”

“Is your eye evil
Because I am good?”

I closed the Bible, gathered up my books, went inside to join the people from whom I was responsible.