

September 24, 2017
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 19:27-20:16

What Then Will WE Have?

What then will WE have? At the end of the day, Jesus, what will WE have as our reward for following you? For being your disciples and sacrificing and serving and working our tails off? When others haven't even done half the work, what then will WE have? That's the question behind our parable today about the laborers in the vineyard. 'Look,' Peter says, 'we have left everything to follow you (unlike others). What then will WE have?'

'Well, let me tell you a story,' says Jesus. And he describes a landowner who hires laborers early in the morning to go out into his vineyard. Then the owner goes out again and hires more laborers at 9am, then again at noon, and then at 3pm and then at 5pm he is still hiring. And when it's quitting time, he pays them all. And he pays them all exactly the same thing. From the last to the first. They get the same wage. And the ones who worked all day are not happy, of course, and they begin to grumble. "Wait a second!," they say. "We worked hard from the very beginning. And those others, they only worked half a day; and those over there,

they worked an hour. And you are giving them the same pay as us?”

“Well,” says the landowner—and here comes the lesson for the disciples— “you knew the wages when you started. This is how I do things. And I’m allowed to do what I see fit with what’s mine. Are you envious that I am so generous?” And so, says Jesus, the first will be last and the last will be first.

Not exactly a way to keep your employees happy or to keep them at all. Telling them that they will get paid like everyone else in the end. JUST LIKE everyone else, no matter how long they work. What you will get, others will get too. Be prepared, Jesus says. That’s how it will be in the Kingdom of God. And I can’t tell if I like this story from Jesus because it’s so honest or if I find it frustrating like the disciples. But I am assured by Biblical scholars that that’s I should feel. I should feel challenged because that’s what Jesus is trying to do with this parable. He’s challenging me. To go beyond thinking about myself to thinking about the Kingdom. To go beyond what is fair to what is good. Because all who serve and sacrifice for God’s Kingdom will get the same thing. They will get the same eternal life, the same reward. And it won’t seem

fair to me. And it might make me mad, that God gives and gives and gives to just about anyone who shows us. But that's what God's kingdom is like, Jesus says. So, will you be envious of God's generosity or will you call it good?

So, what then will WE have? Peter asks the question because Peter wants to know because Peter is one of the illustrious twelve disciples. And those twelve disciples had sacrificed a lot for Jesus. They had put in a lot of time and a lot effort following him around the regions of Galilee and beyond. They had done more than most. Certainly more than the one who had come to Jesus a few verses earlier. A rich young man had come to ask what he needed to do to have eternal life. And Jesus answered him, "Keep all of the commandments. And love your neighbor." And the rich young man replied, Yes, yes, I do all these things. What else must I do? "Well, says Jesus, if you really want a Kingdom of God kind of life, sell everything you have. Give the money to the poor, and come follow me." And it says in the scriptures that the rich young man went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

Peter had watched all of this unfold with Jesus. And after the rich young man left, Peter piped up in his lead disciple way, and said: “Look, Jesus. Look, he says. LOOK”, as if Jesus hadn’t seen what Peter is about to point out. “Look, WE have left everything to follow you. WE have made sacrifices. WE have made hard choices. WE have put in long hours for the kingdom of God. WE have given up our possessions. Unlike that rich young man. So, what then will WE have for what we have done?” Peter wants to know how much more he will get. Because that’s how things work in the world. When you do more, you get more. When you work harder, your paycheck is bigger. You have incentive. And here is Jesus’ chance to incentivize his disciples and to incentivize his church. Because incentives are what we like in the world. Incentives are what get your employees to hit their benchmarks. Incentives get your kids to do their chores. Incentives increase productivity and boost the bottom line. And everyone is happy. Bring in five new accounts and you get a bonus. Add twenty new members and you’ll get a raise. Clean out the garage and you’ll get more allowance. That’s how things work. That’s

how things SHOULD work if you want things to be fair. And you want your employees to be happy.

But according to Jesus, that's not how things work in the Kingdom of God. That's not how discipleship works. You don't get more for doing more. There isn't a bonus for more effort or more hours on your timesheet. In the end, you will get the same wage as everyone else. The same payment: eternal life, abundant life, life beyond this life, with God. Jesus is telling his disciples that they are missing the point. They are missing the Kingdom if they are focused just on themselves. And comparing what they get to what others get. And the envy and jealousy of worrying about what's our and what's theirs and what's fair. If we are honest, all of us can get caught up in that; comparing what we have to what others what. Judging whether or not they deserve it. It's not fair because they didn't work as hard but they have more Legos or a nicer bike. Before we saw what they had, it didn't matter, but now that we have seen it, we want to grumble. How come they have a pony and a trampoline and a remote-control helicopter? How come they have a better car and a better house and better health than I do? How come she

has more free time and he is more successful and their church gets more people? And how is it that they deserve all of that? They haven't worked as hard. They aren't as faithful. It's just not fair.

We are hardwired for envy. From the very beginning it's been that way. From the time of Cain and Abel we have wanted to have as much, if not more, than the other guy. Cain and Abel both worked hard and they both gave their offerings that were pleasing to the Lord; but Abel's was somehow MORE pleasing. And it wasn't fair. So in a jealous rage, Cain killed his brother Abel. Envy is a problem for us. That's why two of the Ten Commandments warn us about it. Thou shalt not covet, it says, twice. Do not want what someone else has. But even now, even us, we are prone to the WHAT ABOUT ME? attitude. What about my prosperity? What about my legacy? For all that I've done, God, what then will I have?

It's not fair. Especially if we have been doing the work, showing up, putting in the time. We've been the ones logging long hours and making sure things get done. We have looked after our kids and our grandchildren and our aging parents. We're the ones cleaning up the

church kitchen, or working in the Community Garden on Saturdays, or teaching Sunday School. We have balanced the budgets and sung in the choir and gone to community forums and we have just shown up. Again and again, giving our time and money and energy, laboring for the Kingdom. Wondering if anyone even notices. Or if God even notices. For all that we have done, what then will WE have?

We want to know that our work matters. We want to know that it means something. And Jesus tells us that it does mean something. It means everything. That we do the work of the Kingdom means everything to God and it means eternal life for us. Abundant life. Not life later, but life right now. That's the secret. A Kingdom life means being closer to God right now. Closer to joy and peace and hope. It is the fruitful labor that the apostle Paul talks about today. It means better clarity and a better heart for you, and a better world for others. What more could you want? What more is there?

Jesus challenges to go beyond thinking about ourselves to thinking about God's Kingdom. To not just look for what is fair, but what is good. To know that our wages, our life with God, is already secure. In August, we

went to the Homeplace to do devotions. And it started off for me as one more thing I had to do. Have to get the songs together. Have to get the program printed. Make sure it's in the announcements. Wait to see how many people will go. John Davis and I were the ones who were there. And we gathered the residents of the Hope House as they finished their Sunday lunch. And we sat down and we began with prayer and I told myself that this was for the Kingdom. Then we started to sing some hymns. And the elders who had seemed so disengaged, at first, started to perk up. Then they started to sing. And then they started to tap their feet. And after the songs, we talked about the hidden treasures of the kingdom. And the treasured memories that we have. We talked about how precious life is. And the lady next to me, she didn't say too much. But when we got to our final song oh, did she sing. "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine. Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine." It was her treasure that she was singing about. The treasure that I have, and that you have. The life beyond this life that God has for us. That's the kind of God we have. The kind who has abundant life for whoever wants it. Like the landowner who goes again and again to the

marketplace to find new laborers. God goes out again and again to bring more people in. Those who stand idle in the marketplace. Those who are waiting and longing for something to do. For a reason, for a purpose. Again and again, God goes out to collect the bored and the jaded. The last and the lost. And God offers them purpose and a place to belong. And it's not that God needs the help. In our parable, there is no indication that the landowner needs that many workers. But he wants these people with no life to have life. To have work, to be a part of something, to not stand idle.¹

God is crazy about us. And God will go to crazy lengths for us to have life and have it abundantly. And not just us. But latecomers, new folks, young people, strangers. God wants people to be included and involved. God will keep inviting more people to know the peace and joy of life in Christ. Life that labors and sacrifices and gives itself for the life of the world. For the life in others. Will we be envious of our generous God, or will we grateful that God is so good?

I invite you now to reflect on your life. Whether you live in competition or contentment.

¹ Brent Ira Driggers, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=143

You have two cards. And I ask you to write on one of those cards some resentment you hold in your heart, something that isn't fair, something you believe you lack, something others have that you don't have. Be honest.

Then write on the other card some blessing, something you do have, some area of abundance, something for which you are grateful in your own life or, in the life of someone else.²

When the offering plate comes around, put in the one you wish to lay down. And hold on to the one you want to keep.

² David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1489>