

Matthew 20: 1-16

STARTLE US, O GOD, WITH YOUR AMAZING GRACE, WHICH IS BEFORE US AND BEHIND US, ABOVE AND BELOW US; YOUR LOVE THAT SURROUNDS US WHILE WE ARE HERE AND IN EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY, EVEN AND ESPECIALLY MOMENTS WHEN WE ARE BUSY AND NOT THINKING ABOUT YOU. O GOD, SPEAK YOUR WORD TO US. REMIND US OF YOUR LOVE IN JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

THE LATE HENRI NOUWEN, DUTCH PRIEST AND THEOLOGIAN, ONCE SAID THAT, “THE HARDEST THING FOR US TO UNDERSTAND IS HOW GOD CAN LOVE ALL HUMAN BEINGS WITH THE SAME UNLIMITED LOVE, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME LOVING EACH OF THEM IN A TOTALLY UNIQUE WAY. SOMEHOW, WE THINK WE CAN ONLY FULLY ENJOY OUR BEING LOVED BY GOD IF OTHERS ARE LOVED LESS THAN WE ARE.”

EVERY CHILD WONDERS HOW IT IS THAT PARENTS CAN LOVE MORE THAN ONE CHILD EQUALLY AND YET UNIQUELY. GOD LOVES EACH OF US, AUGUSTINE SAID, AS IF THERE WERE ONLY ONE OF US TO LOVE. BUT IT DOESN'T OFTEN FEEL LIKE THAT...IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY LIFE. “YOU LOVE HER MORE THAN YOU LOVE ME” THE CHILD SAYS, SOMETIMES JOKINGLY AND SOMETIMES IN DEAD SERIOUSNESS.

ONE THING THAT OFTEN HELPS ME UNDERSTAND DIFFICULT STORIES LIKE THIS ONE FROM MATTHEW IS TO SEE WHERE THEY FIT. AT WHAT POINT IN HIS LIFE DOES JESUS TELL THE STORY? WHERE IS HE AND WHAT HE IS DOING? TO WHOM IS HE TALKING? WHAT HAS JUST HAPPENED AND WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

IF YOU TURN TO THE 19TH CHAPTER OF MATTHEW TO THE PARAGRAPH BEFORE THIS PARABLE, YOU FIND OUT THAT PETER HAS JUST ASKED JESUS WHAT HE AND THE OTHER DISCIPLES CAN EXPECT IN THE WAY OF REWARD FOR THEIR LOYALTY TO JESUS. THEY HAVE GIVEN UP EVERYTHING TO FOLLOW HIM, PETER POINTS OUT. WHAT WILL HE GIVE THEM IN RETURN? “BUT MANY THAT ARE FIRST WILL BE LAST,” JESUS SAYS, “AND THE LAST FIRST.” THEN HE TELLS THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD.

THAT IS WHAT HAPPENS *BEFORE* THE STORY. WHAT HAPPENS *AFTER* IS THAT JAMES AND JOHN'S MOTHER COMES UP TO JESUS AND MAKES A SPECIAL CASE FOR HER TWO SONS, ASKING JESUS TO GIVE THEM THE BEST THRONES IN THE KINGDOM, ONE ON HIS LEFT AND ONE ON HIS RIGHT.

SO BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER JESUS TELLS THIS PARABLE, HIS OWN DISCIPLES ARE JOCKEYING FOR POSITION, WANTING GOOD SEATS IN THE KINGDOM, COMPETING FOR THE BEST SEATS, EACH OF THEM TRYING TO BE FIRST IN LINE.

HAVE YOU EVER DONE THAT? I REMEMBER WAITING IN LINE FOR THE SUMMER MOVIES AT THE ELKS THEATRE IN RAPID CITY WHEN I WAS IN GRADE SCHOOL. IT WAS SUMMERTIME, AND THERE WERE ALWAYS LOTS OF US THERE. OUR PARENTS WOULD DROP US OFF IN THE HEAT OF THE AFTERTOON AND WE WOULD STAND IN THE SHADE OF THE AWNING OUTSIDE AND WAIT FOR THE THEATRE TO OPEN, DEBATING WHETHER WE WANTED POPCORN OR HOT TAMALLIES.

WE WERE LOUD AND BOISTEROUS, STANDING SO CLOSE TOGETHER THAT WE COULD SMELL EACH OTHER...THAT DAMP, HEALTHY SMELL THAT CHILDREN GIVE OFF IN THE SUMMERTIME. OUR FRIENDS WOULD ARRIVE AND WE WOULD SHOUT OUT THEIR NAMES, MOTIONING THEM OVER TO CLAIM THE PLACES WE HAD SAVED FOR THEM. THE KIDS BEHIND US WOULD COMPLAIN LOUDLY AND SO WOULD WE WHEN THE SAME THING HAPPENED IN FRONT OF US, BUT IT WAS ALL PART OF GAME.

WHERE EVERY ONE OF US WANTED TO BE WAS RIGHT UP THERE AT THE FRONT OF THE LINE. THAT WAS THE BEST PLACE TO BE, NOT ONLY BECAUSE YOU WERE FIRST INSIDE, BUT BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE WHEN THE MOMENT CAME, WHEN THE DOORS WERE UNLOCKED, AND THE MANAGER PUSHED THEM OPEN, SO THAT A GREAT WAVE OF COLD AIR ROLLED OUT WITH THE BEAUTIFUL SMELL OF FRESHLY POPPED POPCORN. THOSE WHO HAD PLACES AT THE FRONT OF THE LINE GOT THE VERY BEST OF IT. I CANNOT IMAGINE ANYTHING MORE DISAPPOINTING THAN IF THE MANAGER HAD COME OUTSIDE AND REVERSED THE ORDER, TELLING THOSE OF US AT THE FRONT OF THE LINE TO STAY PUT WHILE HE INVITED THOSE AT THE END OF THE LINE---THOSE WHO HAD JUST ARRIVED, THOSE WHO WERE NOT

EVEN HOT YET FROM STANDING IN THE SUN---WHILE HE INVITED THEM TO ENTER THE THEATRE FIRST. I THINK I WOULD HAVE CRIED; MAYBE EVEN BOOED, BECAUSE IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN FAIR. THOSE OF US AT THE FRONT OF THE LINE HAD *EARNED* OUR REWARD; WE KNEW IT AND SO DID EVERYONE ELSE. ON WHAT GROUNDS WOULD ANYONE DARE REVERSE THE ORDER?

ACCORDING TO TODAY'S PARABLE, THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE JUST FEELS LIKE BEING GENEROUS. THOSE ARE HIS GROUNDS. HE CAN DO WHATEVER HE WANTS TO DO IN HIS OWN VINEYARD, AND WHAT HE WANTS IS TO LET THE LAST BE FIRST AND THE FIRST BE LAST. EVERYONE WILL GET PAID; NO ONE WILL GO HOME EMPTY HANDED. HE SIMPLY WANTS TO REVERSE THE ORDER AND PAY ALL THE WORKERS THE SAME THING, REGARDLESS OF HOW LONG THEY HAVE STOOD IN THE SUN.

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE HAS KEPT HIS PART OF THE BARGAIN AND HAS PAID EXACTLY WHAT THEY WERE PROMISED. WHAT BUSINESS IS IT OF ANYONE'S WHAT HE PAYS THE OTHERS? THE VINEYARD IS HIS, THE MONEY IS HIS. ISN'T HE ALLOWED TO DO WHAT HE WANTS TO WITH WHAT BELONGS TO HIM?

BUT LIKE MOST HUMAN BEINGS THOSE WHO ARRIVED FIRST HAVE AN INNATE SENSE OF WHAT IS FAIR AND WHAT IS NOT. EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK IS FAIR; EQUAL PAY FOR UNEQUAL WORK IS NOT FAIR. REWARDING THOSE WHO DO THE MOST WORK IS FAIR; REWARDING THOSE WHO DO THE LEAST IS NOT FAIR. TREATING EVERYONE THE SAME IS FAIR; TREATING EVERYONE THE SAME WHEN THEY ARE *NOT* THE SAME IS NOT FAIR.

WE'VE HEARD IT ALL OUR LIVES HAVEN'T WE? LIFE IS NOT FAIR. WHICH IS WHY IT SEEMS ALL THAT MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN GOD SHOULD BE. GOD SHOULD BE THE *ONE* AUTHORITY WHOM YOU CAN COUNT ON TO REWARD PEOPLE ACCORDING TO THEIR EFFORTS, WHO KEEPS TRACK OF HOW LONG YOU'VE WORKED AND HOW HARD YOU'VE WORKED AND DOES NOT LET PEOPLE BREAK INTO LINE AHEAD OF YOU. GOD SHOULD BE THE *ONE* MANAGER WHO PATROLS THE LINE, WALKING UP AND DOWN TO MAKE SURE EVERYONE STAYS WHERE HE OR SHE BELONGS, SO THAT THE FIRST REMAIN FIRST AND THE

LAST WAIT THEIR TURNS AT THE END OF THE LINE. LIFE MAY NOT BE FAIR, BUT GOD SHOULD BE.

BUT IT IS NOT SO, ACCORDING TO TODAY'S STORY. ACCORDING TO TODAY'S STORY, GOD IS THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE WHO PUTS THE SAME AMOUNT OF MONEY INTO A STACK OF LITTLE WHITE ENVELOPES AND INSTRUCTS THE FOREMAN TO PASS THEM OUT BEGINNING AT THE END OF THE LINE, WITH THOSE WHO ARRIVED LAST AND WORKED LEAST. MOVING FROM THE END OF THE LINE TOWARD THE FRONT, WHERE THOSE WHO ARRIVED FIRST AND WORKED MOST ARE STANDING, THE FOREMAN DOES WHAT HE IS TOLD, BUT DEPENDING ON WHERE HE IS IN THE LINE THE RESPONSE HE GETS IS DRASTICALLY DIFFERENT.

THAT'S THE QUESTION I ALWAYS END UP WITH...WHERE DO I SEE MYSELF IN THAT LINE? WHERE ARE YOU IN THE LINE? THE STORY SOUNDS VERY DIFFERENT IF WE'RE AT THE END OF THE LINE THAN IT DOES FROM THE FRONT OF THE LINE, BUT ISN'T IT INTERESTING THAT 99% OF US PROBABLY HEARD IT FROM FRONT-ROW SEATS? ARE WE THE ONES WHO HAVE GOTTEN THE SHORT END OF THE STICK; THE ONES WHO HAVE BEEN CHEATED? ARE WE THE ONES WHO GOT UP EARLY AND WORKED HARD AND STAYED LATE AND ALL FOR WHAT? SO THAT SOME UNFAIR MASTER OF THE HOUSE CAN COME ALONG AND START AT THE WRONG END OF THE LINE, TREATING US LIKE THE LAZY ONES WHO DIDN'T EVEN ARRIVE UNTIL AFTERNOON!

IT'S A CURIOUS THING THAT'S HOW MOST OF US HEAR THE PARABLE, BUT IT'S ENTIRELY POSSIBLE WE'RE MISTAKEN ABOUT WHERE WE ARE IN LINE. DID YOU EVER THINK ABOUT THAT? IT'S ENTIRELY POSSIBLE THAT, AS FAR AS GOD IS CONCERNED, WE ARE HALFWAY AROUND THE BLOCK, THAT THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE AHEAD OF US IN LINE, PEOPLE WHO ARE FAR MORE DESERVING OF GOD'S LOVE THAN WE ARE. THEY ARE AT THE FRONT OF THE LINE, AND WE ARE NEAR THE END OF IT FOR ALL SORTS OF REASONS. WE HAVE OUR REASONS. FIRST OF ALL, NO ONE TOLD US ABOUT IT. WE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THERE WAS A LINE UNTIL LATE IN THE DAY. BUT EVEN IF WE HAD KNOWN, WE MIGHT NOT HAVE DONE MUCH ABOUT IT BECAUSE WE'RE ALL SO BUSY AND THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS WE MEAN TO DO THAT WE JUST NEVER GET AROUND TO DOING, AND THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS WE

MEAN NOT TO DO THAT WE END UP DONG ANYWAY. EVEN WHEN WE MANAGE TO DO OUR BEST, THINGS COME UP....PEOPLE GET SICK, WORK NEEDS US TO STAY LATE, FAMILY COMMITMENTS COME UP. THERE ARE A LOT OF REASONS...REAL REASONS..WHY PEOPLE END UP AT THE END OF THE LINE, AND ONLY GOD CAN SORT THEM ALL OUT. BUT SUPPOSE FOR A MOMENT THAT IT IS *YOU/ME* BACK THERE, CRANING OUR NECKS TO GET A GLIMPSE OF THE THEATRE, KNOWING YOU WILL NEVER MAKE IT, THAT ALL THE TICKETS WILL BE GONE LONG BEFORE YOU GET THERE AND YOU WILL HAVE ONE VERY LONG HOT SUMMER AFTERNOON WHILE EVERYONE ELSE IS LAUGHING AND EATING POPCORN IN THE COOL, DARK THEATRE. ABOUT MAKES YOU WANT TO CRY, TO GIVE UP, WHEN ALL OF A SUDDEN THERE'S SOME COMMOTION, AND THE MANAGER APPEARS OUT OF NOWHERE AND WALKS RIGHT UP TO YOU, SAYING "WE'RE STARTING AT THIS END TODAY AND HANDS YOU YOUR TICKET." EVERYONE AT THE END OF THE LINE BEGINS TO CHEER.

GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS, AND IF WE WANT TO SEE THINGS HIS WAY WE MIGHT QUESTION OUR OWN IDEAS OF WHAT'S FAIR, AND WHY WE GET SO UPSET WHEN OUR LINES DO NOT WORK.

SOME SAY GOD IS NOT FAIR, BUT DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU ARE IN LINE THAT CAN SOUND LIKE POWERFUL GOOD NEWS, BECAUSE IF GOD IS NOT FAIR, THEN THERE IS A CHANCE WE WILL GET PAID MORE THAN WE ARE WORTH, THAT WE WILL GET MORE THAN WE DESERVE, THAT WE WILL MAKE IT THROUGH THE DOORS EVEN THOUGH WE ARE LAST IN LINE....NOT BECAUSE OF WHO *WE* ARE BUT BECAUSE OF WHO GOD *IS*.

GOD IS NOT FAIR...GOD IS *GENEROUS*, AND IF WE QUESTION THAT GENEROSITY IT IS ONLY BECAUSE WE HAVE FORGOTTEN WHERE WE STAND. MOST OF US DISCOVER ALONG THE WAY, THAT THE BEST OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS ARE BASED, NOT SO MUCH ON OUR WONDERFUL ATTRIBUTES, BUT ON SOMEONE ELSE'S PATIENCE, FORGIVENESS, ACCEPTANCE, AND GRACE. AND THAT WHATEVER STANDING WE HAVE WITH GOD, LIKEWISE, IS NOT, FINALLY, BECAUSE WE ARE SO WONDERFUL, HARDWORKING, UPRIGHT AND RIGHTEOUS, BUT BECAUSE GOD SOMEHOW CHOOSES TO LOVE US. THANKS BE TO GOD.

