

Jumping The Line, Gracefully

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, September 24th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 20:1-16

I'm standing fourth in line at Tim Hortons and the cashier/server is in a training mode and moving very slowly and the line is getting longer and people are shifting from one foot to another in their impatience. Then a construction worker, wearing one of those yellow workjackets, comes through the door, strides up to another staff behind the counter and asks for two coffees, double-double, to go. In less than a minute two coffees are handed to him and he turns to go out the door. The woman behind me steps out of line blocking him. She says: "The line forms back there, you know!" He says to her: "Sorry, Lady, but I don't have time to wait!", and steps around her and is gone. And she is so steamed up she can hardly contain herself. We all understand - don't we?

The drama of Matthew's parable emerges when the labourers - some of whom have worked all day while others have worked a short while - come to get paid. It is in that moment that Jesus exposes destructive attitudes of jealousy, position and keeping score. We read: "Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 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?... I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you'". It appears that divinity has its privileges after all.

The story, from the point of view of the all-day workers, sounds so reasonable. I have even heard it debated whether death-bed confessions really ought to bring eternal life or not. The problem is we are not the Giver-God is.

God's invitation is to reward — the reward of faith. The reward in this parable is understood by Matthew to be eternal life. The duration of one's participation in Christ's Church, in the Christian faith, has no real bearing on the gift of forever, does it?

When it comes to eternity, there are no lines to stand and wait your turn, no clocks to punch, no time to keep, no attendance sheets to sign, no sick notes from the doctor to present to explain your absence – no, not when it comes to eternity. By using the common hiring and paying of the labourer, Jesus exposes the human dynamics present among faithful people as well as in the world. Fellow labourers in God's vineyard receive an unconditional invitation. Our choices emerge as we respond. Willing to respond is the first step and is critical. Never mind all that other stuff.

Louise Hay is a famous author and philanthropist. She owns a publishing company, best-selling book and tape series, and a house by the ocean. Louise Hay was once asked what led her to her great work. Her response? She said, "It was simple. I just did the next thing in front of me and helped out where I could." (Jesus CEO; Laurie Beth Jones; pg. 131) The first choice we have in any opportunity is to be willing. I know it sounds simplistic - but it's nonetheless true. Louise Hay attributes her life success to the simple formula of being willing to do what comes next.

I can't help but wonder how many fine works of art, compositions of music or great achievements in business or politics never saw the light of day because the one who could do it kept waiting for "the big thing." Life just doesn't work that way; there is no "big thing" — just a series of little things that add up to big things.

In the parable the labourers' willingness to work — even after the day was pretty much spent - led to great reward. So what is stopping you from that project you've been putting off? What "big thing" have you been waiting for before you will take that risk and write that book, get that bathroom done? God's invitation to you is to just take the next step and then see what God can do. More specifically to Jesus' parable is the invitation to be willing to work with others and share the rewards. And that's the other side of our choices isn't it — to choose to reject unhealthy attitudes and behaviors?

When I have had the privilege speaking at a congregation, I am fond of asking, "Whose Church is this?" And the answer is, "It's God's church, or it is not a church". It's something else: a social club, a community gathering place. On countless occasions I have listened as Christians have talked about how they went out of their way and beyond their schedules to care for others. And in every conversation they were eager to admit that they got more in the giving than the other did in their receiving. That's why jealousy, position and score-keeping are, frankly, irrelevant to the kingdom of heaven. What this parable reminds us, when it is all said and done that it's all about God's generosity and getting on with the gift of our lives as a church, a believing people, a community of faith, a People of God.

You may have read the story about the boy with a rare disease that had to live his entire life in a sterile plastic bubble, for a single germ, an un-sterilized touch, could be fatal. Anyone reaching to him through that hermetically sealed opening in the bubble had to wear sterilized gloves, and everything that came to him--books, food, utensils, gifts — had to be decontaminated before passing through that opening. He was sealed off, isolated, in permanent quarantine. But even the airtight, sterile bubble couldn't save him. When the boy understood that he was dying, he asked but for only one thing — to reach outside the bubble and to feel the touch of his father's bare hand. Doomed, knowing that this encounter was death itself, the boy reached out and touched his father's hand.

You can't outperform and outgive God. The incredible longing for human touch that led that boy to reach out to his father is planted by God inside each one of us. But many of us have put God in the bubble; the eternal longing of God's heart was to reach out and touch us. God sent Jesus as that touch, and death was the inevitable consequence.

The living God reaches outside the bubble of our daily monotony and imbues each day with a touch of forever. God take that pain, that heartbreak, that challenge that seems overwhelming and gives us hope. And when we have felt this reaching touch of God, we will not begrudge it to anyone, no matter how long or short their faith journey might have been.

Eternity is God's gift. Oh, I know that shouldn't surprise us. After all, only the eternal God can give it. Our paltry bubbles of jealousy, position and score-keeping will not block this touch of God. As God has given to you and me, we pray that God will touch the lives of those whom we love, those we know and don't know, because the generosity of God is multiplied and unconditional as we share it - without reservation. And no questions asked. Amen.

Let us pray together: Almighty God, you reached through the bubble of eternity to touch us in the Savior Jesus Christ. As we have been touched by your eternal love, turn us outward that we might be your touch in your world. Amen.