

Matthew 20:1-16- Last will be first first will be last

- Given the choice, which would you choose, love or justice?
- I know this is a hard choice, as both are really important.
- So if you're anything like me, you understandably want both.
- And yet every once in a while, we are forced to make a choice.
- And that can feel really, really hard.
- I think that's part of what is going on in this quite remarkable parable.
- You know the contours of this story as well as I do, but let's tarry for a few moments at the climatic moments of the story.
- Let's first put ourselves in the place of the workers who were chosen last.
- Likely they had all but given up hope for work that day and would soon make the long and disappointing trek home.
- They are laborers who can expect to earn from their work no more than a daily wage – just enough, that is, to support them and their families for one more day.
- What we now call food insecurity is their norm,
- and so it's easy to imagine their excitement when they finally get an invitation to work –
- they won't earn a full day's wage, but enough perhaps to scrape by.
- That excitement only multiplies when the manager unexpectedly and inexplicably pays them for a full day!
- I suspect that equal measures of relief, joy, and gratitude suddenly coursed through their veins as each received their payment.
- Now, let's put ourselves in the place of those who had been called to work at the beginning of the day.
- Grateful for employment, they had labored all day, doing the work, not because they derive any particular pleasure from their labor,
- But simply because they TOO have to put food on the table.

- At the end of their shift, they line up, as they do every day, to receive their wage.
- And when word travels down the line that those hired at the end of the day received a full day's wage, their own moment of wonder turns quickly to anticipation as they calculate what that might mean for them.
- It's a reasonable expectation, that if people who had worked only one hour received a full day's wage, then those who worked all day would receive much more?
- But all that anticipation dissipates when the manager gives them the same payment: a day's wage.
- This must seem to them so utterly unfair – they have, after all, worked literally ten times longer than those other workers.
- And so resentment, rather than gratitude, now grabs hold of them.
- It's all too easy, I think, for us to dismiss these laborers as ungrateful or selfish or, to borrow a biblical phrase, hard of heart.
- But come on – their reaction is almost exactly what most of us would have felt had we been in their shoes.
- Because what happens to them simply does not add up and so doesn't seem fair.
- Never mind it's what was contracted – if those who worked an hour received a day's wage, then those who worked so much longer deserve more.
- So I'll ask again: if forced to choose, which would you take, love or justice?
- I know this parable is at one level about generosity,
- but I think that every act of generosity is also and simultaneously an act of love.
- Which brings the occasional clash of these two values.
- These workers want justice. And who can blame them.
- They feel cheated because they calculated their wages!

- And that's what justice does: it counts and measures and calculates because justice is a matter of the law and seeks to ensure that all people receive equal treatment, equal opportunity, and equal standing. Which is why justice is so important to us.
- But the manager responds that he has acted not with justice in mind but rather with love expressed through generosity.
- And when these two – justice and love – clash, it can get ugly.
- Because where justice counts, love loses track.
- Where justice calculates, love lets go. Where justice holds all things in the balance, love and generosity give everything away, upsetting the balances we have so carefully arranged.
- Love, however, is not the opposite of justice – far from it!
- Rather, love passes beyond the realm of justice and law into the realm of relationship.
- Think about it for a minute: what would it be like to govern your relationships primarily by the law of justice, counting up every slight or injury done you by your partner so that could do the same to him/her?
- Keeping track of every time your child or parent disappoints you so you can hand them the tally at the end of the day?
- Logging every hurt you experience at the hands of those around you so that you can remember, keeping a record of your grievances and waiting for amends?
- Can you imagine living your life this way?
- For as we talked about last week, while the justice makes room for relationships, it's love, generosity, and forgiveness that enable relationships to flourish.
- And here's the thing about this hypothetical choice between love and justice, it turns out that it's not hypothetical after all,

- as we actually make this choice every day.
- When, for instance, we overlook all those who drive their cars quite reasonably but instead get driven to distraction by the one guy who cuts us off.
- Or when we overlook the thousand kindnesses a partner or friend has performed on our behalf but nurse a grudge about the one thing they did to hurt our feelings.
- At each of these turns, we can choose: will we call for justice, or will we live out of generosity and love.
- Put this way, of course we want to live out of love.
- But, truth be told, that's hard, real hard, as we seem almost hardwired to count our hurts and disappointments rather than our blessings.
- So perhaps I've asked this question wrong.
- Acknowledging that while we want to choose love but end up calling for justice, maybe rather than asking which we would choose, I should instead point out which one God chooses.
- Because that's why Jesus tells this parable.
- The primary actor in this story is the vineyard owner, the one who keeps sending for workers all day long until everyone has secured employment, the one who instructs the manager to pay generously, the one who takes the time to answer the indignant laborers, the one who in all ways and at every possible turn chooses love over justice.
- We know God cares about justice. The law, prophets, and Jesus' own life and ministry testify to that.
- No matter how much we identify with those who worked all day, in the end we realize that we are the latecomers, those who had no good reason to expect such lavish, even reckless generosity.

- This is God we discover, the God who looks at us in love and therefore overlooks all those places we fall short and chooses to treat us with unmerited grace, mercy, and generosity.
- Which would we choose? Better question – which has God already chosen?