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Matthew 20:1-6

### *Fuzzy Math*

“Why did you come to Duke?” I asked the first year student during orientation. To study math,” she said. “I love math.” Anytime someone utters the words, “I love math,” I feel the need to say prayers for that person’s soul. Math to me is one of the great mysteries of life. The mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity is nothing compared to the mystery of basic Algebra. When I was in high school I was so bad at math, my parents hired a tutor for me, a sweet-smiling terribly idealistic college junior with boundless energy. At the end of our third session she was in tears. “No, no, no!” she cried again. The X axis is horizontal; the Y axis is vertical!” “Right, right . . . I always get those confused,” I mumbled, handing her another tissue.

“What is it about math that you love?” I asked the Duke freshman. “The predictability,” she replied. “In a world as unpredictable as ours, when one never knows what will happen from day to day, I love having something to count on, knowing that when I finish the problem at hand I will either be right or wrong, true or false, black or white.” I understand the freshman’s take on predictability. It is good to have some parts of our lives that function according to plan.

Throughout Mathew’s Gospel, Jesus has been telling stories, parables, using images, metaphors and narratives to open our lives to the kingdom of heaven all around us. Over and over again Jesus begins by saying “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” and then launches into a story. Calculus may be predictable. Jesus is not. All of these stories are ticking bombs, little packages of divine dynamite waiting to explode into our lives and reorient our understanding of who God is and how God’s upside down kingdom works. The kingdom of heaven is a like a shepherd who abandons 99 sheep to search and recover one that is lost, like a merchant who sells all her product to buy one pearl, like a farmer who sells all his land to buy one field, like a planter who wastes much of his seed on rocky soil. Call it what you like, bad economics, poor farming, sloppy business, fuzzy math. The kingdom of heaven is predictably unpredictable.

Today’s story is the last of the kingdom parables. A landowner goes out in the marketplace early in the morning to hire workers for the vineyard. After a couple hours, the landowner goes back out and hires more. Then again at noon more are hired, and in the middle of the afternoon, still more are brought into the vineyard. Like the old man and his little John-boat in New Orleans who kept going back into the flooded city, finding more and more people who needed to be rescued, trip after trip he couldn’t stand the idea of anybody being left out, boatload after boatload he carried people to safety. Jesus says this landowner is like that, desperately wants everyone included, wanting everyone working away in the vineyard, a landowner who can’t stand to leave anybody out.

Finally, an hour before quitting time, the landowner goes out once more to the market-square and discovers still more workers standing around. The landowner says to the last group, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They respond with one of the most painful lines in all of scripture, “Because no one has hired us.”

The text doesn't tell us why they weren't hired. Perhaps they didn't have the skills to be hired. Maybe they didn't speak the language, didn't have an education, or didn't have a green card. Maybe they couldn't afford bus fare that morning and had to walk, arriving late, or had to stay home that morning with a sick child. Perhaps there simply weren't enough jobs to go around. Whatever the reason, here they are, unemployed, left out, forgotten. Thus the landowner says to the un-hired workers, "You also go into the vineyard."

When pay-time in the vineyard comes, the landowner puts them in a line – what some in this sanctuary might call a "*queue*," I think? – the ones who had only been on the job an hour aren't even breathing hard; they haven't even loosened up their muscles or muddied their hands. While the ones hired at dawn are dripping with the grime and sweat of a hard fought 12-hour day. The landowner starts dishing out the pay, starting with the last ones to be hired. When the exhausted first-comers see that the late-comers received a full day's pay for an hour's work, their backs straighten, heart beats picks up, eyes get wide. If this generous landowner paid those slackers a day's wages for but an hour's work, surely their back-breaking effort would be justly rewarded. When they arrive at the front of the queue and receive the same wage, their exhaustion turns to anger, "What kind of business owner are you? Don't you know the basics of incentive and reward?! We're the ones with the sunburns, the blisters, and pulled muscles. Not only do you pay us last but pay us the same! We deserve better!" Ironically, the whole blow-up could have been avoided had the landowner just paid the workers based on the order they arrived. However, the landowner is making a larger point; he has the jealous workers watch. The landowner is free to give to whom he chooses to be generous to all the workers in the vineyard.

Every sophomore in Econ 63 knows this is no way to make a buck. It's not just bad business and fuzzy math, it's not fair! Work plus effort equals production, and production equals *pay*. Such is the economy that drives our lives. Those who are in the most demand, the hardest workers with the highest skills, deserve the first and greatest reward.

Yet this parable suggests that in the economy of God's kingdom there is something even better than profit margin, even greater than incentive and reward, even more beautiful than a sharply run business . . . and that is grace. The story is about God's generosity, about the lavish grace of a God who wants everyone inside the vineyard, who won't stop rushing out into the marketplace until all have been rounded up, all have been included in the work of the vineyard, even if it takes all day.

And then we discover God goes even further. In the economy of God's grace it is the same people who are hired at day's end who are first to receive God's generosity. In the kingdom of God the last become first in line. The outsiders become the insiders. The poor, forgotten, and left out, those hired last, are the ones closest to God's heart.

You know what it is like to be left out, to be an outsider, don't you? Remember when you were on the playground as a child and the captains squared off to pick teams. "I'll take her. I've got him. You come over here. I suppose you will do next." The whole time as you sat watching the others get picked in front of you, insides churning with shame and embarrassment, you wanted to wave your hand and say, "Pick me! I want to play, too! I'm here! I'm here!" Or when you were in high school or college and mustered up the courage to go to the dance even though you didn't have a date. There you sat, alone on a folding chair through the entire evening, sipping a coke, doing your best to exude confidence, but inside wanting to cry out, "Don't forget me! I'm here! I'm here!" desperately hoping that somebody, anybody, would come over and ask you to dance, include you in the party. How

about after rush week when the fraternity and sorority bids went out and all your friends were invited to join, except you? A first year student said to me two weeks into her new life at Duke. "I fear I won't make it here. Everyone is smarter than me, more athletic than me, more beautiful than me, more accomplished than me. I feel so alone." There is nothing that hurts more than feeling like you don't belong, than being left out.

I wonder if we can think about this parable through the lens of family life. God has a family, the people Israel, and then God says to the outsiders, the Gentiles, to us Christians, I want you to be part of this family, like a loving mother at dinnertime who just can't stomach having any of her children away from the table. All of us are somehow a part of a family and we know that our families rarely function the way they should, are often filled with deep rooted jealousies and petty anger. I remember as a boy getting terribly jealous because it seemed my older brother got all the attention, that he was always first, a great student, a strong athlete, and praised often and loudly for it. And surely there were times when the jealousy went the other way, when he thought I received undeserved attention, that being the little brother I got the breaks that he never did, a later bed time, a bigger allowance, my own room at an earlier age. Our parents simply loved their children and wanted them to feel included and supported, regardless of how we might deserve or not deserve to be treated.

The parents of an eighteen year old and an eleven year old don't love the eighteen year old more because the older child has been in the family vineyard longer. Time plus energy does not translate into just reward, not in the economy of God's kingdom. The kingdom's reward is grace, and like love, grace does not depend on the worthiness of the one receiving it. When Jesus died on the cross, he died for the thief to his right, as much as Mother Mary at his feet, for faithful Mary Magdalene as much as smug Peter, for the prodigal son as much as his prodigal brother. From Jesus' vantage point, breathing his last on the cross, the workers in the vineyard are all family, all beloved, all forgiven.

A friend told me this week of a great scene in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. It's a novel about a prestigious family in Old South Mississippi during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The younger son, Benjy, however, is left out. He is ridiculed for not being smart enough, for not living up to the great "Compson" family name. But the maid, Dilsey, also an outsider, really loves Benjy. She says to him, "tell um the good lawd don't keer whether he smart or not." His real name isn't even Benjy, but they changed it to Benjy when they realize he wouldn't be a "real Compson," but Dilsey asserts that a name is enough by saying, "My name been Dilsey since fore I could remember and it be Dilsey when they's long forgot me." The Compson daughter asks snidely, "How will they know it's Dilsey when it's long forgot?" Dilsey says, "It'll be in the book, honey, writ out." The daughter chides her, knowing she can't read, "Can you read it?" Dilsey fires back, "Won't have to. They'll read it for me. All I got to do is say 'Ise here! 'Ise here!'"

To the forgotten workers in the marketplace, to the Benjys and Dilseys of the world, to all who for whatever reason have been left out, to all who are crying, "Ise here!" Jesus stretches his arms wide, "You're hired. Come into the vineyard, come into the family, and take your place at the front of the line." Amen.