

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Theme: How do we treat the help? How does God treat the help?

How many of you have seen the movie, *The Help*? Have some of you read the book as well? The movie has been one of the top movies since it hit theatres in the second week of August. *The Help* tells the powerful, but disturbing story of African-American women who served as maids and servants to white families in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960's. In the movie we also meet some of the young, white women who employ them and we see how they treat "the help." I can tell you, if you haven't seen the movie or read the book, they don't treat "the help" very well.

I call this story powerful because it chronicles the shifting scene of race relations in our nation, and it does so from the perspective of strong women of great courage, some of whom are white and some black. They dared to question society's rules about race and they dared to tell their stories publically to expose the ugly truth.

I also call this story disturbing because it succeeds in exposing the truth of race relations. I loved the movie, but left the theater shaking my head at this shameful time in our history. And it left me remembering that when we treat others with prejudice and hate and condescension, when we perceive that there are others not-as-good-as or not-as-worthy-as we are, it affects everyone. The whole community suffers. This movie certainly makes me reflect on how I and our whole culture treats "the help" still today.

Our parable today shows us how God treats "the help," doesn't it? Jesus tells this parable to challenge our assumptions about the way that things should work. Jesus tells the parable in such a way that exposes our tendency to see others as less worthy or less deserving, and ourselves as more deserving. And remember how this parable starts: *For the Kingdom of Heaven is like...*

Jesus' parable tells us and shows us how things look from God's perspective.

In this case "the help" is made up of laborers, day-laborers who wait every day for someone to call them to work. If they get work, then they get paid and there is food on the table. If not, they go home empty-handed. So they wait in the marketplace in hopes of being hired.

There is a landowner who comes to this marketplace and hires some laborers at the beginning of the day and sends them to work in exchange for the usually daily wage: a denarius. But this landowner comes back, again and again through the day, selecting other laborers as well each time he comes and sending them to work. When the end of the day comes and it is time to pay all the laborers, he starts with those who arrived last and worked the least. They are paid first and receive the usual day's pay. Finally, those who started at the very beginning of the day are paid and they receive the same as all the others, the usual daily wage, one denarius.

Those first workers watched all this unfold and in their minds they were figuring that if those hired at the end of the day received one denarius that certainly the landowner would pay them more since they worked the whole day. If this landowner was so generous with the workers who arrived last, imagine how generous he would be with them, they thought. But all the workers received the same things, no matter when they came.

And so the grumbling started. They turned on that landowner and let him have it. But the landowner gave them a thoughtful response that explained his perspective. He took care of them, as he promised. He paid them what they expected when they started. He was simply choosing to be generous with others as well. That didn't take away from them, it only blessed others as well. The generosity of the landowner was for all. Like it or not...take it or leave it...that's the way the landowner works. That's how he treats "the help."

What might Jesus have for us to know here? What was he teaching the people of his day and what is he teaching us today?

First, he wants to challenge our idea of why and how we get what we get when it comes to God. In those days and especially in our own day and time, we live with the understanding that the harder and longer we work the payoff will be bigger. So the basketball player who spends two hours every day after school shooting free throws will be the one prepared to sink the game-winning free throws in the big game. The one who studies the longest and the hardest during class and for the final test will get the best grade. The employee who puts in the most hours and who exceeds all expectations of the job will be the one to get the raise. This is the way things go much of the time and this is what we expect that those who do these things will receive more than those who do not. They are not as deserving.

So we step into our relationship with God and we expect the same thing. If we work harder, if we do more, if we obey more precisely and pray more fervently and give more generously, then there should be more for us than for others.

This parable would tell us otherwise. It tells us that God will give us the blessings of his love, his forgiveness and his grace, but not because we deserve it and not because we work harder. It happens because God is generous and has chosen to grant these things to us and to anyone else he chooses. We are not more deserving. We are not “more than” others and they are not “less than” us. We all stand as co-workers in God’s kingdom and we all receive because of who God is, not because of what we’ve done.

I also think Jesus wants us to look at an ugly truth about how we treat each other.

When we think that we are better than some else or more deserving because of our work, or our race, or our class or anything else, we have the tendency to treat them poorly, and the consequences can be devastating for everyone. We saw that in a country like South Africa that formalized its prejudice into a system called Apartheid. We lived through it as a nation as we enslaved people because of their race and throughout the generations have seen the consequences that demean all of us. We still have work to do.

Jesus’ parable of the landowner and the laborers is only a story, but we can imagine how things might have continued on the way home. The laborers who came late would be so happy, but the ones who started early and worked longer might well take out their anger and disappointment on those who did less. There might have been insults thrown, some words of harassment spoken. And the next day, when they all stood again in the marketplace waiting for work, would we be surprised if a fight broke out?

Maybe an alternate ending for this parable would sound something like this, picking up after all of the workers had received the usual daily wage:

“And after everyone had been paid they all returned to their homes, rejoicing at their good fortune to have been called by a generous landowner that day. Their hearts were filled with gratitude and they were so happy for one another. Everyone was able to provide for their families that night.”

Is it not God’s will and the way of God’s kingdom that his blessings and generosity are for everyone? Did not Jesus give his life for the sins of the world? Is not the promise that God comes for the healing of the nations? The Bible says it is.

In the Kingdom of Heaven we are grateful for God’s generosity which doesn’t leave us out, but simply welcomes others in as well. It is that image that Jesus uses often of the banquet: it is a feast for everyone where God’s abundance is shared and where we rejoice to be together in God’s presence.

I will leave you with three questions that challenge me from this story and might do so for you as well.

Where in our lives are we grumbling against those we deem “less than,” and less deserving?

Where in our lives are we ungrateful for what God has given because we think we should be getting more than someone else?

Where in our lives are we judging God’s decisions about his grace, who gets it and how much?

May God’s Word today help us to re-think our human perspectives and to see things from God’s view in the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.