

Sermon for September 20, 2020
 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
 Sermon Texts: Exodus 16: 2-15 and Matthew 20” 1-16
 Sermon Title: “*Standing in Line*”

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, we trust your promises, we trust your constant presence, we live to serve you, we live to love others, and we live united as a community of faith. Come to us this morning, Holy One, as we stand firm on the foundation of Christ. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Search us deeply, open our hearts to what you have to say to us today, cleanse us of all dubious devotions. Give us the humility to enter the Kingdom of God, which has drawn near. Amen.

When I was a kid it was a thrill to go to a matinee on Saturday afternoons. Summer and winter, we would enter the cinema on the main street of Parry Sound around 1 pm. There were two shows, I remember, and the second one was always a western. Just before intermission we watched a 10- minute gangster serial that was means to lure you back the next week. At intermission we bought cokes, and Milk Duds, and popcorn. Given the violence of the films, I’m sure they wouldn’t be considered age-appropriate for today’s young people, but other than continuing to like gangster films, I’m convinced I wasn’t scarred for life.

In the summer, when the matinee let out about 4:30, I would walk into the lovely pale light of a perfect summer day, but by October that lovely light had given way to darkness and I would hurry the mile home to a warm house and supper waiting. Other than the gangster clips, westerns, and the dark nights, the other detail I remember was the long lines that formed way before the box office opened and snaked down the sidewalk for several blocks. There were lots of reasons to come early to get a place at the front of the line, so when the manager opened the doors, you could bolt forward - to get your snacks before the movie, to make sure you didn’t have to sit way up front with your head tilted so far back to watch the screen that you had a headache when you got home, or to sit in the dimmest of lights in the back of the theatre so you could hold hands with your boy friend or girl friend.

There were lots of rules associated with those lines. For example, it was ok to “save a place in line” for one, or at most two, friends, but any more than that and you were likely to get booed by those behind you. You could leave your place in line for a few minutes to talk to someone who was farther back in line, but you had to ask the person in front or behind you to “save your place.” I can’t imagine what we would have felt if the manager had come out and announced to us who were near the front of the line that we must take our place at the back of the line and let those who were last come into the theatre first. That would have been enough to make an 8-year old cry, a 12-year-old riot. It wouldn’t be fair. We had earned our place in line by showing up early (that’s called initiative) and had observed all the rules of lines. Didn’t that count for anything?

But reversing the order of the line is exactly what the landowner does in the parable that Jesus tells the disciples in this week's lectionary text from the Gospel of Matthew. The landowner goes out in the early morning to hire workers to work in his vineyard; they agree to a daily wage. Then the landowner returns to the marketplace at nine o'clock, at noon, then again at about three, and finally at five to hire workers for the vineyard. When evening comes, the landowner tells his manager to give the laborers their pay, starting with the ones who had come the latest – at five o'clock. Each is paid the usual daily wage. Those who started early are probably jumping for joy at the landowner's generosity because they expect to be paid more. But that's not what happens. They receive exactly the same amount as the ones who worked only an hour. They begin to grumble against the landlord because they have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. It doesn't seem fair.

But the landlord reminds them that he has kept his part of the bargain: "*Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?*" The owner of the vineyard reminds them that the vineyard is his, the money is his, and he can do with them what he wishes, can't he. "*Or are you envious because I am generous?*" he asks. You bet they are! Just like the children standing in line at the matinee, they have an innate sense of what is fair and what isn't. Equal pay for equal work is fair; equal pay for unequal work is not fair.

You don't have to be very old to figure out that life is unfair. That's why it's so important for us to have a God whom we can count on to keep track of the line, so that the people who have labored long, arrived first and left last, given money consistently to good causes, and bathed regularly should remain first, stay at the front of the line. Life may not be fair, but God certainly should be.

This is a hard parable because it disrupts our picture of what God rewards. If this parable describes what heaven is really like, then winning God's approval doesn't depend on being the best behaved, the hardest worker, or the best dressed. One of the things that helps understand this parable is to look at what comes before and after its telling. In chapter 19 in the paragraph just before Jesus tells this parable, Peter has asked what the disciples' reward will be for leaving everything and following him. Jesus promises them twelve thrones in the kingdom but concludes "*many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*" Immediately following the parable, the mother of James and John comes to Jesus and makes an argument that her sons should have the best thrones in heaven, one on Jesus' left and one on his right. Jesus tells her that his throne will not be one of gold and jewels but one of wood and nails in the shape of a cross.

In our class last Wednesday, we discussed Flannery O'Connor's short story *Revelation*. The protagonist, Ruby Turpin, is one of those people who in her mind had done everything right and it was only fair that she and her husband Claude were near the front of the line in life. However, in a doctor's waiting room a young college student, Mary Grace, throws a book at Ruby, after Mary Grace overhears the conversation Ruby is having with the girl's mother; Mary Grace lands a blow with the book on Ruby's left eye. In the ensuing turmoil, Mary Grace locks eyes with Ruby and whispers, "go back to hell

where you came from, you old wart hog.” Ruby cannot shake Mary Grace’s words. Later that evening, back at home, Ruby experiences an epiphany, a revelation. She sees in a visionary light a horde of souls rumbling toward heaven – the people she has discriminated against are first in line, and the people like her and Claude, “people who had always had a little of everything and had the God-given sense to use it right” brought up the back of the line.

Ruby Turpin’s vision is of the radical grace that Jesus describes, a grace so radical that it’s hard for those of us who think we are at the head of the line to swallow it. Jesus turns our worlds upside down, confuses all our dearest and most heartfelt assumptions about what we deserve. But how you hear Jesus’ parable depends entirely upon where you are standing in the line. If you were born in a third world country, don’t have enough to eat, have a serious illness, lose your job or your business, or a relationship goes down the tubes, then this parable is good news. There are so many reasons that people end up at the end of the line that have nothing at all to do with God’s love for them, and only God can ultimately straighten it all out.

For reasons that I don’t understand, God loves me and loves you indiscriminately, wherever we are standing in line. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard tells us that we don’t have a clue about how God works and that God’s ways are not our ways. God is not fair, but God is *generous*. It may turn out that all of us get more than we deserve, get paid more than we are worth. If we make it into God’s kingdom it may not be because of who we are, but because of who God is. The cheering for the wages that are given at the end of the day, the generosity of the master who rewards those who have come late, may very well turn out to be our own. Amen.