

God, An Equal Opportunity Employer

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Introduction: Do you know what a spoonerism is? It's the accidental transposition of sounds in a sentence. It's a linguistic "flip-flop." If you meant to say "well-oiled bicycle" but you said, "well-boiled icicle" then you have made a spoonerism. If you started to say, "troop of boy scouts," but instead said, "scoop of boy trouts." That's a spoonerism. It's interesting that a preacher gave birth to this word. His name was William Archibald Spooner, President of Oxford. He asked the Dean's secretary, is the "bean dizzy" In church he once said to a lady, "Mardem me, padam, aren't you occupewing the wrong pie?" I'm sure many said, "What?, What did you say?"

When Jesus finished some of his stories I know that some people scratched their heads and asked, "Did you hear what he just said?" Did he mean what he said? That was the case with the story that was read to us from Matthew 20. It's an unfortunate chapter division because it really is a continuation of a conversation found in ch.19. A rich young man came to Jesus to question him about eternal life. Jesus knew that in the young man's mind money was the god he worshipped. Jesus challenged the man to get rid of his wealth so he could begin to trust the living God. The young man could not handle that and left.

Well this really perked the interest of Peter, (Matthew 19:27) In light of what Jesus told the young man Peter wondered about his decision to leave all and follow Jesus. Jesus responded that God will be debtor to no man and you will be rewarded in heaven and on earth. But Jesus was bothered about the spirit in which the question was framed. This leads us to the text found in 19:20 and 20:16. "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

Well, we know who was first. Following Ben Franklin's axiom, the "early bird gets the worm," the man who was at the labor pool before 6:00 a.m. He negotiated with the vineyard owner and settled on the normal wage for a day, 1 denarius. It was a roller-coaster day for this worker. At 9:00 a.m. he was thinking, "This vineyard is much larger than I thought." But to his delight the owner brought in more pickers. At high noon when he was eating lunch he thought, "There is no way that we can complete this harvest today." But to his amazement the owner was resourceful and hired new bodies.

At 3:00 p.m. when perhaps the sky took on an ominous hue he thought, "Wow, it looks like a storm is brewing. What grapes we don't pick today may not be here tomorrow." But the owner brought in another eager crew. Then at 5:00 p.m. the weary worker picker concluded, "We only have an hour to go. There is no way we will be able to finish." The he could hardly believe his eyes. The owner came through in the eleventh hour. The impossible had

happened and the laborer shouted, "We made it! What a victory!" But then the vineyard owner did an unthinkable thing. He commanded the pay master to settle with the 11th hour workers first and they received a denarius. One day's wage for one hour's work.

Thoughts of generosity welled up in the man who had worked all day. "It looks like it's a denarius per hour." That means I'll make two weeks wages in one day." But slowly his optimism drooped. One denarius to the 3:00 workers, one to the high noon men, and one denarius for the mid-morning laborers. By the time the silver coin was given to the early birds they were full of disgust. Read vv. 11-12. I understand their complaint, don't you?

But Jesus was teaching Peter kingdom truths. He wants to show Peter that the work of God operates on different principles than the structures of the world. When I was a young pastor of 23 I was told "Now we don't want our church to become worldly." I thought they meant moral compromise and liberal theology and I agreed. But in my four pastorates I found worldliness comes in more subtle forms: "seniority", "pay your dues", earn your position...probation, security, chain of commands, etc.

Remember the parables are not only pictures into kingdom culture, but their mirrors for us to see ourselves. Let me just pick out two pictures I see in the mirror.

1. Kingdom workers don't call the shots, v. 2. The 9th, 12th, 3rd, and 11th hour employees illustrate trust. They didn't negotiate as did early bird worker. Instead they trusted the owner's integrity when he said, "whatever is right I will give you, and so they went." Trust is the key word. "I will build my church." Jesus said. The communicator will want to study Scriptures such as: I Cor. 12: 11, 18, John 21:21-22
2. Kingdom workers are objects of grace. Their appointment is not based on merit, worth what they deserved, seniority, longevity. Our first century church planting hero understood this. He trashed all his first place credentials so that he might experience how Jesus could empower him. I Cor. 15:10

CONCLUSION: Grace is so hard for people like me to grasp. I am one of those early starters, worked hard, I am constantly asking God to deliver me from the elder brother's spirit seeing the party being given to the younger son who wasted the father's goods and in the 11th hour comes home and gets everything plus a celebration. In 1991 after 11 years of hard work at FBC a new church started not so far from us. Immediate exciting growth occurred for that church. It was the talk of the city. "It's not fair!" I complained. But in time the Lord spoke to my heart, He said, "Hey, the only reason you were assigned here was because of my grace." Now years later I can say, I love late comers like the thief on the cross I wonder how many

lives he has touched because he reached out moments before death and gained paradise. I love short termers. More than 30 of the finest seminarians came and went in two or three year tours to bless us in the noon day sun or the weariness of the afternoon. I love new comers who brought a vitamin of joy such as the opera singers who had no time to audition or be approved. He was available for a song or two that caused our hearts to leap for joy. Some plant, some water, God gives the increase. He knows when to add.

All I am talking about today is the grace, the extraordinary grace of God, may I say the outrageous grace of God.Â Humble your hearts and open your eyes to see that God is ready to shower grace upon the humble. She told us that I never was a child. I never was coddled, or liked, or understood by my family. I never felt that I belonged. I was always an outsider. She went on to say, I just ran wild as a little girl. I was bad, always a leader of the street gang in stealing and general hell-raising. Years went by and the world recognized her talent in drama and music. For her "blues" were her autobiography. She kept saying that I want to sing decent things, but they wouldn't let me. She was fifty years old when Dr. Billy Graham invited her to sing at his campaigns. She caused many a heart to experience the words and say I know what she means when Ethel Waters sang:

*Why should I feel discouraged
Why should the shadows come
Why should my heart be lonely
And long for heaven and home
When Jesus is my portion
My constant friend is he
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know he's watching me
repeat.*

Ethel Waters did not wave a denomination banner, but late in her life she stated her faith simply. I don't say I'm a religious person. I say I'm a born-again Christian . And that is the most important thing in my life because I've found my living Savior. If you are a latecomer, a new comer, an 11th hour person God loves you and I love you and I hope this church will.