

“5 o’clock Christians”  
Matthew 20: 1-16  
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
Reverend Dusty Fiedler  
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As is so often the case, such an eventful week like last week adds one more layer of understanding to a chosen Biblical text. We come with new questions, and with a need, a desire to know God’s leading and God’s wisdom for our daily lives. I wish I might have heard what your Tuesday morning Bible study group talked about, when they studied this familiar parable from Matthew’s gospel--for so much is happening, in this story and in our hearts.

It’s always fun to ask little children about things that seem to them to be old! Now, you middle schoolers need to understand that, to some 3-yr. olds, you are old—at 12! But, you don’t need to have lived very long to learn that “old” is a relative term... We Virginians are so proud of our “old” historical buildings in Williamsburg or Jamestown—but if you visit London or Rome or Prague or Cairo, you see quickly that our American heritage is really very new... So what if W&M was founded in 1693, 324 years ago? That sounds old, but Oxford University (England) gives 1096 as its founding date, and the oldest continual university in the world is one in Fez, Morocco, founded in 859—1158 yrs. ago—that’s old!

I suspect every family represented here has something at home that you consider to be old—a piece of furniture, maybe, grandmother’s antique desk (we have one of these), old letters, or an old photo album, with pictures taken when cameras were huge! Maybe a family Bible, or some other book... Kids, when you are offered these old things, passed on to you, stop for a moment before you say, “No, thank you”—stop, ask if there is a family story, or some memory that is worth preserving... Sometimes old things can be of greater value to us than the new, because of the tradition they represent, and the ties with our past history... Some treasured old things can make us rich. But other old things—like old grudges, old prejudices, old fears, old ways of doing things—some old things only hold us back, if we insist on keeping them...

This is what Jesus’ parable is about—about God’s generous gifts to us in a new way, a fresh, new life that is offered to all, making us that ‘new creation’ that Bob talked about with the kids.

As our President visits places and people connected to the ancient faiths of Abraham, it seems to me that we American Christians need to give some thought to what our faith means in these difficult, confusing days... How will we live as “new creations”?

Remember how our Old Testament text, verses from Psalm 105, reminds the Jews of God’s covenant-keeping: *...remember the miracles that God performed and the judgments that God gave. The Lord is our God;... God will keep his covenant forever, his promises for a thousand generations.* Just so we need to be reminded of what God promises—not just to a select few, but to all God’s children, the poor and the most vulnerable most of all... And we need to consider what God asks of us, in grateful response...

*This is what the kingdom of heaven is like, Jesus says—follow me, and you'll find yourself living like this...* Now, what Jesus describes is way different from what the disciples were used to... Peter has just asked Jesus (end of chapter 19), *Look, we have left everything and followed you. What will we get out of this?* The disciples obviously expect something extra, something to compensate them for their very special faithfulness and hard work... That's when Jesus tells them (and us!) this story.. It's a hard story, I think--where old expectations get turned upside down, topsy-turvy, and those who think of themselves as 1<sup>st</sup> class disciples, hard workers, are put last, while the last ones—those who never mattered before—they are now put first.. In Jesus' story, all can be winners, not just a few...

And here's for me the hard part: all categories that we have set up--like rich and poor, powerful and powerless, able and disabled, insider and outsider, superior and inferior, honored and shamed—these all change in God's kingdom, because God in Christ Jesus makes us “new creations” who are all equal before God's mercy...

This is so hard for the disciples, it's so hard for us because we've gotten used to a different world, a world order, where most of us are on top... We celebrate being No.1! Through this unsettling parable, Jesus both envisions God's new order and unmasks the soul-killing ways of the old order... Did you catch the master's question at the story's end? *Are you jealous because I am generous*, the landowner--who is like God—asks... Remember how, when God's people were wandering in the wilderness with Moses, they started grumbling because they were hungry and God, our gracious God, sent them manna—everybody could have just enough, you couldn't hoard it, but there was plenty every day for all... Just like Jesus teaches us to pray, *'Give us this day our daily bread...* There's plenty, for all, but not too much... Are we living out this promise today?

Who are the grumblers in this story—is it the 5 o'clock workers, who only work one hour and yet receive a full day's wage? Of course not! The grumblers are those who worked all day. Like the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, they grumble that this isn't fair! And it isn't fair, by our old standards--but in God's kingdom, where the first are last and the last are first, there is plenty for all (while nobody gets too much).

What do we do with this story? What do we do with Jesus? How can we rejoice in the coming of God's Kingdom that works like this?

Here's the key, I think, for going away a happy camper, for rejoicing in God's generosity... Most of us, I think—if we are honest—most of us see ourselves as hard-working, faithful 6am workers—we work all day, we're the ones you can count on. But maybe—do you think it's possible that God sees us, all of us as 5 o'clock workers? For we are all needy, in God's eyes... We mean well, we think we've worked hard, like the disciples, but we like the old ways, where we have done so well and been so richly rewarded on the old terms. Did you notice how the 6am workers seem unconcerned about those left without work?

Here is the new insight that I have in reading this story again this week: the workers don't relate very well. I never paid them much attention, but in many ways they are like our divided nation, with the rift between the haves and the have nots, the powerful and the out-of-power, the

old order and the new, the proudly conservative and the proudly liberal so evident to all...What will bring us together, with respect and civility?

A couple of Sundays ago I was listening to Krista Tippett early in the morning...I'll bet that some of you also listen to her radio program *On Being*, where she interviews so thoughtfully some very interesting people. That Sunday she announced that she would be talking with Glenn Beck, and I considered tuning out—but not before Glenn Beck caught my quick attention with his admission—an apology, really—about how he now sees that he had hurt our country with his harsh rhetoric...WOW! That sort of self-knowing, that apology seems new—and if Glenn Beck can apologize, then maybe I need to consider, too, how my taking sides and not always listening reflectively has added to the problem. What a good starting place, for us all to admit our compliance with the status quo and our holding on to old prejudices.

How different this story's ending, if all the workers might get to know each other—like God knows us! Here's the *good* news: If God does see us all as 5 o'clock workers—because of our excuses, or our old fears, or our old biases, because of our sins that keep us from rejoicing in God's new ways—still, it doesn't matter, it doesn't keep us from God, if we are willing to come to Christ--because God is so generous. God always keeps God's promises, and God will be merciful to each one of us, regardless. If we are all last, then we'll all be first, ultimately.

So (preach to myself!)—why be a jealous grumbler, when instead you might be a grateful follower?

PRAYER: Generous God—we want to accept your new ways in Christ, for we believe that your kingdom ways are really best for us and for all the world. Help us to rejoice in your loving mercy offered to us all. You are so gracious and generous to every one of us 5 o'clock Christians. Thank you, dear God, for loving us so much! May the way we live our days be our grateful response! AMEN.