



March 17, 2019

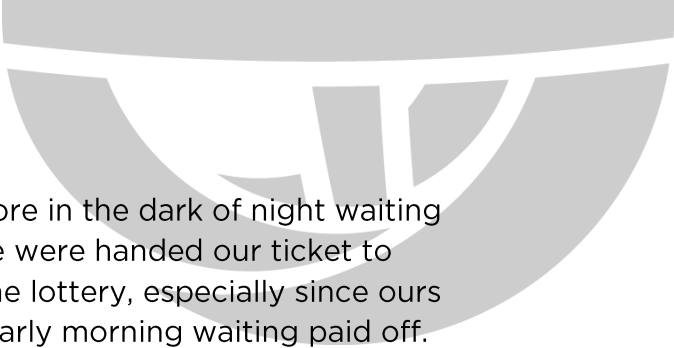
Are You a Scorekeeper?
Pastor Lisa Kipp

Matthew 20:1-16 NRSV

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’ ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

I don’t typically like to admit this to people – considering all the bad publicity and the commercialism of it – but I love Black Friday shopping. I detest shopping on the other 364 days of the year (unless, of course, it’s on Amazon, from my couch, while in my pajamas), but I love Black Friday shopping. The biggest reason is because my mom and I have a long-standing tradition (dating back to the Santa Bear era at Dayton’s) of getting up early and spending the day together. Getting our Christmas shopping done is just the icing on the cake. But on top of that, I really love a good deal. And if I’m honest, I love the competitiveness of the hunt for the last remaining Door Buster item.

My best deal was probably about ten years ago. Toys-R-Us had a huge early morning sale on iPods. While we didn’t go quite so far as bringing our camping



chairs with us, we did join the line outside the toy store in the dark of night waiting to claim a couple iPods for my oldest sons. When we were handed our ticket to claim the items inside, it was almost like we'd won the lottery, especially since ours were among the last of the tickets distributed. Our early morning waiting paid off.


But it doesn't always work out so well for us. This past Black Friday we arrived to Target just minutes after their doors opened, only to discover that by the time we made our way like cattle through the meandering hurdles guiding us to the front door, that we had no idea where to find the video game console I was looking for. You can imagine my disgust at the clear injustice of this situation.

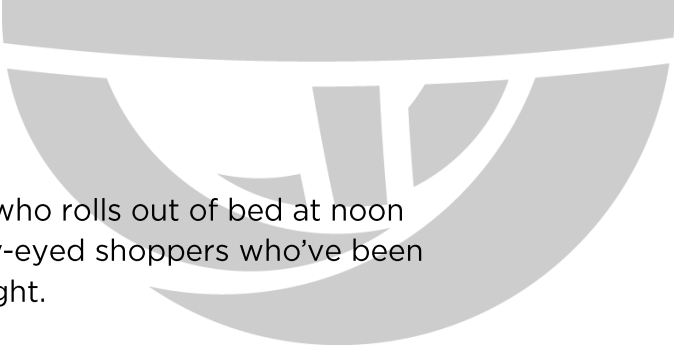
On the other hand, while I wasn't so pleased about that layout, I was elated when I did grab the very last wireless headphones I wanted for Charlie when I slyly discovered that those items had been set out in the produce section of the store. (Yes, I am fully aware that I should be embarrassed by my passion about scoring Black Friday deals.)

So am I a scorekeeper? Sure sounds like it. In fact, I think it is a part of our human condition to keep track of how we're doing and how we rate against others. If we are honest, we are likely quick to identify with the early morning vineyard workers. Consider their perspective, after all. They showed up early to get in line as a day laborer. The work would be undoubtedly strenuous. In fact, they probably even found their way to the vineyard still in the dark of night, to ensure that they would get to the front of the line and be selected. They worked hard all day in the hot sun. Can you blame them for pulling out their mental calculators, examining how hard and long they worked, only to earn the same as those lucky ones who started work when the sun was already on its way down?

It's like the county employee who arrives early to his desk every morning, takes every phone call while his tardy coworkers slowly make their way in, and works through his lunch hour, only to be told in January that there will be no merit increases this year, but instead everyone will be receiving a straight 2% raise.

Or it is like the daughter who gives up her life for two years to care for her dying father. She takes work off to make it to every doctor appointment, misses evenings out with friends while she gets groceries for her dad, and withdraws funds from savings to pay for nursing care. Eventually her sisters show up for his final days in the hospital. Yet the will reads, "I leave my estate to be divided equally among my daughters, because I love them all the same."





And maybe at its most frivolous, it's like the person who rolls out of bed at noon on Black Friday and gets the same deal as the weary-eyed shoppers who've been carefully scouting their bargains since the dark of night.

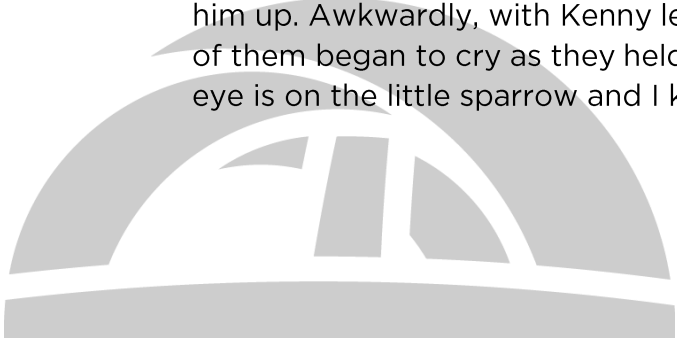
Life is not fair, which is why it seems like we should at least be able to count on God to be fair. We should at least be able to count on God to sort things out so that we all get what we deserve. Then again, perhaps sometimes that wouldn't be so great either.


When Jesus tells a parable it is always more than just a story. It's a truth. A truth that is surprising, maybe even maddening in this case, because God, it turns out, isn't fair either. And this story, this truth, gives us a window both into our human condition and into the heart of God all at the same time.

As humans, we are trapped by our need to compare ourselves with one another. In order to determine how we're doing, we look at the people around us. It isn't always that difficult to find plenty of seemingly unworthy people there; people who don't measure up to our work ethics, our values, our standards. But maybe, the truth Jesus speaks in this parable is to push our egocentric, self-centered human hearts towards hearts that reflect the generous, grace-filled heart of God?

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells the story of a couple of members from her church – Ranola and Ken. Ranola is a member of the church choir. Growing up in the heart of the deep south, she had been a longtime member of the Southern Baptist church. She was no doubt a gregarious and devout member of the church, yet she held firm to some of the convictions she'd been raised on. Those convictions made Ranola, at best, standoffish to Ken. Ken's partner, Brandon, died of AIDS right around the time that Ken started worshiping at the church. According to Ken, "Jesus slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon's loss left." Ken was at home at the church, despite Ranola's rigidity.

It wasn't long after Brandon's death that AIDS began to take away Ken's life, too. After missing church for a couple weeks in a row (something rare for Kenny), he showed up looking weak and emaciated. Several noticed that he wasn't able to stand up and sing the first hymn. But he sang away, with the hymnal in his lap, and his body leaning into the pew. The pianist began to play the second hymn, "His Eye is on the Sparrow." The entire congregation was on their feet now, everyone, that is, except for Kenny. Ranola watched him from the choir loft rather skeptically. And then her face changed, she moved, walked to his side, and bent down to lift him up. Awkwardly, with Kenny leaning in to Ranola almost like a ragdoll, the two of them began to cry as they held on to one another while singing the words, "His eye is on the little sparrow and I know God is watching over you and me." And





there on display for all to see was a picture of God's heart – big enough for Kenny and Ranola and for all the imperfect people that filled the pews that Sunday morning.

You see, at the heart of it, this isn't really a story about the workers in the vineyard. It isn't even as much a story about us. It's a truth about the kingdom of heaven and the size of God's heart – God's heart that doesn't keep score, and God's heart that has enough room for every last sparrow among us.

God isn't fair. If you're keeping score in the vineyard that might not come as good news. But if you're fixing your eyes on the kingdom of heaven, if you're trudging along as best and as broken as you can toward the cross, then that generous, all-encompassing love of God that is big enough to watch over you and me and every last one of us – now matter what time we show up or what we have to offer – is indeed good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.

