

## ***r u kidding?* Part 2: Who Gets To Play ... And When?**

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Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

### **1. What is the Kingdom of Heaven?**

On Ash Wednesday we asked what it means to “become like a child.” According to Jesus, this question is more important than it may seem. He says you cannot enter God’s Kingdom – or the “Kingdom of Heaven” as it is called in Matthew’s gospel – without becoming like a child. Throughout Lent we’ll be answering this question in various ways. Along the way we’ll find that a number of Jesus’ stories and parables that seem confusing or downright disturbing when read by adults suddenly become clear and inviting when understood from a child’s perspective.

Before we go a step further, however, it may be helpful to ask what the Kingdom of God/Heaven is in the first place. Without a clear idea of the general direction Jesus is pointing, it’s a lot harder to know how to get there, or why we would want to.

Last week, at Countryside’s Youth Service, the youth asked a number of children to offer their view of what Heaven is like. Several children described Heaven as a place where everything is bright white with no darkness. Others described Heaven as a place where everyone is happy all the time and you get a private house full of nice stuff to share with only really, really good people. More than one saw heaven as a place where pizza is consumed in unlimited quantities! And many responded with enthusiasm to one child’s vision of heaven as a place where clouds are made of cotton candy.

Yet when these same children were asked where they find Heaven *on earth*, their answers took on a different quality. They said they found Heaven “in other people.” Heaven opened before them when “everyone is working together” and “nothing violent is happening.” One child observed that she experienced heaven when “people take care of you when you’re sick.”

I don’t know about you, but the picture the children painted of Heaven on earth sounds a lot more attractive than the candy-coated, pizza-lined heaven they predicted in the afterlife! I’d gladly trade a place where your house is crammed full of stuff that only “really, really good” people can play with for a realm where the “stuff” *is* the people, and the people help you out when you are sick.

I found this last characteristic particularly insightful. The child who named it had gone beyond seeing Heaven in terms of absence-of-challenge or absence-of-hardship, locating heaven instead *in the heart of challenge and hardship!* This is exactly where Jesus located heaven, as well. To Jesus, Heaven is definitely found in the afterlife, but is just as definitely found on earth. And because God’s Realm is found “*on earth*” as it is

in heaven,” we’ll never find it if we’re looking for something that can only be experienced in the absence of struggle.

This is our first important clue to where Jesus found the Kingdom of Heaven. Our second important clue is reflected in a statement Jesus made about what Heaven is like. Actually, he made quite a number of statements about what Heaven is like, but this one sums up many:

*The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;  
on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*  
Matthew 13:45-46

Combining these two clues, we find that Jesus understood the Kingdom of Heaven – at least as it is experienced on earth – does not *free us* from struggle but better *equips us* for struggle, and the experience of Heaven is so powerful and appealing that you would gladly sell everything you hold dear just to have it.

Do you remember the Neil Diamond song, *Forever in Blue Jeans*? To me, the following lines trace the faint outline of Heaven on earth, at least in one person’s experience:

*Money talks  
But it don’t sing and dance  
And it don’t walk  
And as long as I can have you  
Here with me, I’d much rather be  
Forever in blue jeans*

Trading wealth to be forever in blue jeans with the one you love is like finding a pearl of great price and selling everything you have to own it. It is a response to a concrete experience of what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of Heaven. How about you? What would you give up all other things for? Is it falling in love with a life-partner? Or raising a child? Or would it be the intuition that God is telling you, despite all your struggles, “Well done, good and faithful servant”?

Last Sunday our youth posed a question to our adults as well as the children. They wanted to know where we struggle with forgiveness. Judging from the responses, a number of us would give anything to hear our own father or mother tell us we have done well, let alone God.

Before reading on, why don’t you take a minute or two to consider what you would give up everything for if you knew it wouldn’t necessarily set you free of struggle but would make all your struggles worth it.

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## **II. The Second-Hardest Parable**

Now we can move on to our parable for the day. (Read Matthew 20:1-16)

In my experience, Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers tends to be the second-hardest one for church-people to understand or accept. In case you're wondering, the first-hardest is the parable of the Unjust Steward who is first fired by his master, then rewarded by this same master when the steward cuts the loans of people who owe the master money by as much as fifty percent. But that's fodder for another sermon.

Why is the parable of the vineyard workers so hard to accept? People insist that it's simply not fair to pay those who have hardly worked at all the same wage as those who have worked much. The master's self-described generosity strikes most people as a blatant lack of appreciation for those who have done most for the master. Is this your feeling, too?

Let's approach this difficult parable through the eyes of a child. Imagine you are a child whose mother has asked you to perform chores that will take you all day to complete. As a reward for your efforts, she promises that she will take you to a movie you've been wanting to see – with popcorn – when the chores are done. So you clean up your bedroom, you dust the living room, you scrub the toilet and clean the counters of the downstairs bathroom. You vacuum the rugs. Toward the end of the day, a friend comes over and invites you to play. You say, "I can't play. I'm doing chores so I can go see a movie" – to which your friend responds, "Can I come?"

Hastily, you approach your mom asking if your friend can join you. "Does your friend have money for a movie ticket?" she asks. You check with your friend. No money. But just as your friend turns glumly to leave, your mom says, "I tell you what: If you'll help with the remaining chores, I'll spring for a movie for you, too – with popcorn."

As a child who has been working hard all day to get your chores done, how would you respond to your mother's generosity? Would you throw a tantrum, screaming it's not fair that your friend gets to go to the movie and eat popcorn when you've worked a lot harder for that reward than your friend has? To react in this manner could be called *childish*, but not *childlike*. It's *boring* to see movies with just mom! I'm guessing you'll give mom a big hug because she has just made your whole movie experience twice as enjoyable. And when your friend tells you that your mom is the coolest mom ever, that's probably going to make you happy, too.

In Jesus' parable, the vineyard workers complained about the master's generosity toward the workers who had come at the end of the day. These workers are like a child who would complain that it's "unfair" when his mom offered to pay for his friends' movie ticket. Through this parable, Jesus is revealing that in the Kingdom of Heaven, people know the value of friendship. Even though they strive for fairness, they privilege being together over being fair. And they delight in the times when their friends experience the Master's generosity, for it means their friends may grow to love the Master as much as they do.

Of course, what if those who experience the Master's "unfair" generosity are not your friends? Well, if you love the Master, and they have come to love the Master, too (perhaps because of the Master's generosity), how can you not at least take pleasure in the fact that others are experiencing the same generosity that made you fall in love with the Master?

### **III. Who Gets to Play ... And When?**

There are lots of other ways the message of Jesus' parable comes clearer when viewed through the eyes of a child, but let's consider just one more.

When you attended P.E. class as a child and kids lined up against the wall to be chosen for basketball or other sports, did you ever experience being chosen last? Perhaps you at least know the feeling of fretting that you will be? As it happens, I was chosen last, or next-to-last, many times as a child. I grew tall at an early age, which meant I was a bit clumsy. And I was a little overweight for my age, so I was not only the clumsy guy but the chubby guy. No one wants to play with the clumsy, chubby guy. Yet I can attest from personal experience that the clumsy, chubby guy wants to play just like everyone else. He yearns to be high on the pick just like everyone else, and he's terrified that he'll be picked last.

A child who is used to being picked last hears Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers differently than a child who is always picked first. The last-picked child picks up on the pain and humiliation of those who continue to stand on the street corner as person after person is picked for work ahead of him. He may also pick up on the terror. Did you know, for instance, that day laborers tend to have little money in their savings accounts? If they're not picked for work one day, they and their families may go hungry the next. Of course, this seems obvious if you think about it, but if you're used to being at the top of the heap, not the bottom, do you even think about it?

So reading the parable through the eyes of a last-picked child, you begin to realize that these workers who are still waiting for employment at day's end aren't lazy. They're scared, embarrassed, and yearning like crazy for work. How do you suppose those workers felt toward the Master who paid them a full day's wage even though they'd been picked last? And how do you suppose they felt toward those who had been picked first for their complaining about the Master's generosity?

In Junior High, when I attended summer basketball camp, I actually made the cut for the school basketball team. But I still wasn't a good enough player to do anything but warm the bench at games – at least until we were beating the other team with enough margin that you could send in a donkey and it wouldn't matter. Nevertheless, when our team won a game – which it did quite often – those of us who warmed the bench were always part of the celebration. Can you imagine what benchwarmers would think about first-string players who refused them entrance to the locker room celebration on the grounds that the benchwarmers had only played a few minutes and therefore shouldn't be allowed to the party? As a benchwarmer, I can say that we would probably respond,

“Can’t you just be happy that you played an important role winning without resenting those of us who never got a real chance to play but are nevertheless celebrating the win with you?” We wouldn’t exactly consider them to be model teammates. Likewise, I doubt that anyone who would resent someone for coming late to Heaven’s party would be considered model citizens of God’s Kingdom – if God considered them citizens at all.

Taking this back to Neil Diamond’s heaven-in-blue-jeans analogy, who among us who fell in love in our twenties and got married would resent someone who didn’t find love until their fifties or sixties? You’d have to be either a real jerk, or someone who has never experienced joy within their marriage to begin with.

Or from another angle: I know a minister whose small church has been growing significantly in recent years who is catching hell from a few of the church founders, not praise. Why? “These new people come in here with different ideas. They take our seats in the sanctuary. They get their children baptized and want to serve on boards and committees. But we’ve been laboring at this church a lot longer than they have. We’ve put in our time – and our money – a lot longer than they have.” Knowing my friend, it’s perfectly clear that she loves and respects her founding members as much as any of the newer members, but the fact that she loves them *as much* and not *more than* the newer members is taken as an insult and rejection by some of the founders.

Can you hear Jesus’ parable in my minister-friend’s story? Do those who feel insulted or rejected by the minister’s even-handedness also feel like serving God’s church is joy akin to playing first-string on a basketball team, or do they consider it a burden? How can someone who has experienced this joy in their service of God’s church not feel joy for someone who has come late to the game ... unless they are not really interested in the game to begin with?

Fortunately, what’s keeping my friend afloat amidst the conflict are some of the founding members who never lost the joy of laboring in the vineyard, who are overjoyed to find new relationships among those who have come recently, and get a kick out of the fact that the newer members are excited about being part of an incredible church that they helped found. They’re like the starters who celebrate with the second string and the benchwarmers alike, and those starters are admired and respected all the more for it.

#### **IV. Your Experience of Heaven**

So let’s bring this whole parable full circle. Minutes ago you were invited to consider what you would give up everything for, on the understanding that it wouldn’t necessarily set you free of struggle but would make all your struggles worth it – like living forever in blue jeans. Let’s place whatever slice of heaven you identified firmly in mind, then ask, “If others were to receive what you yearn to have with comparatively less effort or investment of time, what would you think of them?” If you would resent them, then perhaps what you yearn for – or how you’re yearning for it – isn’t really as connected to God’s domain as you might think. You’re being childish, not childlike. But if you would be happy for the latecomers, welcoming all to the party no matter when they entered the game, preferring to be together in joy over being fair in privilege, then probably Jesus

would say that, for you, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. And like a child who has been there a lot longer and worked a lot harder than you, he would say, "Welcome, my good friend! It's so good to have you here!"