

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 9/18/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Matthew 20:1-16

I think that the golden rule of real estate – it's all about location – applies to today's Gospel reading as well. Jesus said, "The last will be first, and the first will be last." Whether we hear this as good news or bad news depends entirely on our location in line.

Most of us are probably accustomed to being pretty close to the front of the line most of the time. We work hard; we take care of our families. We attend to our relationships with neighbors and friends. We give a portion of our income to the church, and we respond generously to other requests for donations to worthy causes. We exercise, take our vitamins, and limit the junk food. We're in church regularly. We coach soccer; we're Scout leaders. We're trying to live lives of integrity.

So, as we listen to the parable that Jesus told, we probably identify most with the workers who were waiting in the market place early in the morning, prepared to put in a full day of work. And because we do, we share their outrage when, at the end of a long, tiring day, those workers who showed up at the last possible moment, putting in a fraction of the work, receive the same wages as everyone else. Because, really, shouldn't those who do more, get more? Shouldn't those who've earned a spot near the front of the line be treated differently than those at the back who didn't work as hard?

Apparently, in the kingdom of God, the answer is "no." Because when we start forming lines and try to position ourselves close to the front of the line by being good or by doing good works, or by comparing who we are and what we have with others in line, we've completely missed the point. The point of the kingdom of God is that our place in any line that we form is completely irrelevant to God. The blessings of God and a relationship with God have absolutely nothing to do with whether or not we deserve either blessings or relationship. The blessings of God and a relationship with God have to do only with the overwhelming love, mercy, and generosity of God. The blessings of God and a relationship with God are about God – not about us.

The blessings of God are about God because God has created the world ...we haven't. God has gifted us with life, breath, senses, human relationships, talents, and adventures. God has given us an appreciation for beauty, an inner spark of creativity, a desire to be productive. God has given us the ability to earn a living and to provide for ourselves and our families. Although we too often forget it, all that we are, and all that we have comes from God. There is really nothing to which we're entitled. Every bit of it is a gift.

A relationship with God is about God and not about us because God has secured for us a present, ongoing, and eternal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. For love of each one of us, God entered human history in the person of Jesus, who lived and died as one of us. God has done it all; we have had absolutely nothing to do with it. It has been given to us as a gift.

So, if what I'm saying is true – if God's love, mercy, and generosity are such that my working hard to ensure a place at the front of the line that has to do with earning God's favor is completely a waste of my time and energy, then why try so hard to be responsible? Why make weekly worship a priority? Why struggle to be truthful in business dealings? Why give of ourselves and our resources if our efforts will be nothing to earn us a privileged position in line?

Because when we understand that God's favor has to do with God and not with us, then we begin to recognize life, and breath, and sunshine, and health, and music, and work, and picnics as God's gifts, and not things to which we're entitled because of who we are or what we've done. When we realize that relationship with God is established through God's redeeming love in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and not through our own worthiness, then we begin to live in grateful response. It's in gratitude that we gather to worship God here together – not to earn a place in line. It's in grateful response that we work hard, and treat others lovingly, and share our resources – not to earn a place in line, but to allow the graciousness of God to flow through us to others.

We live in a world that's full of lines, and the rules of the world insist that we jockey for position in those lines. The rules of the world say that the first will be first, and the last will be last. Jesus says that the first will be last, and the last will be first. How do we get our minds around these strange principles of the kingdom of God that so differ from the principles of the world? How can we even begin to learn to live by the principles of God's kingdom?

I wish that we could simply turn a switch to make that happen, but we can't. I wish that I could give you a profound, but simple spiritual formula, but I can't. But I will offer an idea that I'm going to try and that I hope might be helpful. The world is full of lines. In our daily lives, our cars sit in lines of traffic; we stand in line to buy a cup of coffee, a newspaper, a train ticket, our groceries; we wait in line to board a plane. Could those very lines in which we find ourselves this week serve to remind us that there are no such lines in the kingdom of God? Might we intentionally use each line in which we wait to acknowledge and consciously thank God for the extraordinary gifts of coffee, of transportation, of food, of the ability to see and to read?

Might our position in any line help us to remember that our position with God is completely secure no matter what – not because of where we're standing, but only because of the love, mercy, and generosity of God? Amen.