

Lesson Plans That Work: Lesson Plans for Adults

Proper 20 (A)

New Testament: Matthew 20:1-16

BACKGROUND

In this season after Pentecost, we hear stories of Jesus' ministry in the world and our call to engage in that mission. This season is also known as Ordinary Time coming from the word "ordinal" which means counted time. This time is not ordinary as in common or regular, but it is the time of counted weeks between Pentecost and Advent. The color for this season is green and it is often referred to as the green growing time as we hear stories of what God is calling us to do in the world, we join in that call, and we grow in our faith.

A NOTATION FOR THIS WEEK'S READING

This parable appears in the section of Matthew where those around Jesus are questioning him about everything. As Jesus continues his ministry and the disciples are witnessing his great works, they keep coming to him with questions about taxes, who is the greatest in Heaven, forgiveness, divorce, and how to inherit eternal life. The disciples are trying to figure out this new world that they are experiencing through Jesus' miracles, parables, and teachings. Just prior to our lesson today, the disciples have heard Jesus tell the rich young man that he must sell everything and give the money to the poor. They begin to wonder, "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Meaning, we have left our homes and our families, we have left behind what we know and love to follow you...what will we get in return?

So, Jesus tells them the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. This is a difficult parable as there are many ways it can be read. It could be seen as unfair or pitting justice with grace. However we read it, this parable is about God's generosity and God's grace.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel has sandwiched the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard with 19:30 (³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.) and 20:16 ("So the last will be first, and the first will be last.") Clearly this is an important message for Matthew to get across. That there is a reversal of the way we assume things will be and we are playing by a new rulebook.

A good number of the children will have heard "The first will be last and the last will be first." We don't want them to think this is just about letting the last person in line go first or that they should always be last to receive a reward, but that this is about how much God loves them that it does not matter where they are in line or where they are finding God, but more that they are all a part of this together and we will all receive God's amazing love and grace.

THEME

We are all a part of God's work.

BEFORE CLASS

You will need Bibles or copies of the reading for each person.

BEGINNING

As a way of starting, you can ask the participants if they remember rushing to be first in line when they were growing up. What were the advantages of being first? What were the disadvantages?

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank you for your words that teach us about your love and the amazing gifts that you give us. Be with us as we learn more about you, that we might come to know you in a new way. Amen.

THE STORY: MATTHEW 20:1-16

Invite the participants to each read a sentence of the lesson today, going around the room. They can say "pass" if they choose not to read.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When 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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, '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.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- I wonder what stood out for you?
- I wonder what questions you have?
- What do you imagine it was like to be the first laborers that were hired?
- What was it like to be the laborers that were hired at the end of the day and only had to do a few hours of work?
- I wonder what it felt like for them to all receive the same amount of pay for their work?
- I wonder what it was like to be the landowner who was generous and giving to all his workers?
- Who do you think the landowner could be?
- How might this story be different if it were put into modern day scenario?
- Where do you find yourself in this story?

GETTING CLOSURE

Invite the participants to share stories they can think of when they all pitched in to get the work done. Invite them to share about their favorite part of today's lesson.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious love, we thank you for your unconditional love and grace that you show us each day. As we leave this place, help us to remember that we are all a part of your kingdom and we are all called to do your work in the world around us. Amen.

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