

## Beginning at the End

[Jesus said,] "For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, 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 a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last."

Matthew 20:1-16

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

## Beginning at the End

Few enemies intimidate a preacher more than the familiarity that breeds numbness. People have heard the old, old story before. The good news is not news to them — and frankly, it no longer sounds as good as it used to, either. The interest that such folk bring to sermons is therefore mild.

Some preachers spy low expectations of this kind and endeavor to meet them. Others strive desperately for novelty. The wisest show a discipline born of confidence in the gospel itself: it will show its beauty and grace if only we have the intelligence to dress it in simple clothes of excellent quality.

"Beginning at the End" is an almost pure example of the disciplined and deceptively simple parable sermon. By apt use of image and analogy (notice the way breezes keep cooling people in this sermon), by sturdy and revealing diction, by a discerning portrait of the ways of God and of human beings, Barbara Brown Taylor quietly sharpens the point of the parable until she finally sticks us with it. Then she gives it the twist of grace so that it stays. Then she stops.

---

Barbara Brown Taylor, "Beginning at the End." Reprinted with permission from *Seeds of Heaven*, pp. 73-80. © 1990 Barbara Brown Taylor, published by Forward Movement Publications, 412 Sycamore Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is a little like cod liver oil: you know Jesus is right; you know it must be good for you; but that does not make it any easier to swallow. Along with the parable of the prodigal son, today's parable is one of those stories of forgiveness so radical that it offends, because it seems to reward those who have done the least while it sends those who have worked the hardest to the end of the line.

"So the last will be first, and the first last," Jesus says, scrambling the usual order of things, challenging the sacred assumption by which most of us live our lives — namely, that the front of the line is the place to be, that the way to win God's attention is to be the best person, the hardest worker, the first one into the vineyard in the morning and the last one to leave at night. Only according to today's reading, where that will get you is exactly nowhere. According to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, those at the end of the line will not only be paid as much as those at the front; they will also be paid *first*. It is just not fair.

One thing that often helps me understand hard stories like this one is to see where they fit. At what point in his life does Jesus tell the story? Where is he and what is he doing? To whom is he talking? What has just happened and what happens next?

If you turn to the nineteenth chapter of Matthew, for instance, to the paragraph just before this parable, you find out that Peter has just asked Jesus what he and the other disciples can expect in the way of reward for their loyalty to Jesus. They have given up everything to follow him, Peter points out. What will he give them in return? Jesus promises them twelve thrones in the world to come. "But many that are first will be last," he says, "and the last first." Then he tells the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

That is what happens *before* the story. What happens *after* it is that James's and John's mother comes up to Jesus and makes a special case for her two sons, asking Jesus to *give* them the best thrones in the kingdom, one on his left and one on his right. Politely but firmly, Jesus lets her know that she doesn't know what she is talking about, because his throne will not be made out of gold and jewels but out of wood and nails, in the shape of a cross.

It helps to know where the parable fits, that both before and

after Jesus tells it his own disciples are jockeying for position, wanting good seats in the kingdom, competing for the best seats, each of them trying to be first in line when the doors are propped open and the show begins.

Have you ever done that? I remember waiting in line for the Saturday afternoon matinee at the local movie theatre when I was a little girl. It was summertime, and there were always lots of us there. Our parents would drop us off in the heat of the afternoon, giddy at the prospect of a couple hours' peace and quiet. We stood in the shade of the awning outside and waited for the box office to open, our dollar bills burning holes in our pockets as we debated the economics of popcorn versus junior mints or milk duds.

We were loud and boisterous, standing so close together that we could smell each other — that damp, healthy smell that children give off in the summertime. Our friends would arrive, and we would shout their names, motioning them over to claim the places we had saved for them. The children behind us would complain bitterly, and so would we when the same thing happened in front of us, but it was all part of the game.

Where every one of us wanted to be was right up there at the front of the line. That was the best place to be, not only because you were the first inside, but because you were there when the moment came, when the doors were unlocked and the timid-looking manager pushed them open, so that a great wave of cold air rolled out of the dark theatre and hit you like a blast from the arctic, an icy promise of everything that waited for you inside. That was the moment everyone waited for, and those who had won places at the front of the line got the very best of it.

I cannot imagine anything more disheartening than if the manager had come outside and reversed the order, telling those of us at the front of the line to stay put, while he invited those at the end of the line — those who had just arrived, those who were not even hot yet from standing in the sun — to enter the theatre first. I think I would have cried; I certainly would have booed, because it would not have been fair. Those of us at the front of the line had *earned* our reward; we knew it, and so did everyone else. On what grounds would anyone *dare* reverse the order?

According to today's story, the manager just feels like being generous. Those are his grounds. He can do whatever he wants to do in his own vineyard, and what he wants is to let the last be first and the first be last. Everyone will be paid; no one will go home empty-handed. He simply wants to reverse the order and pay everyone the same thing, regardless of how long they have stood in the sun.

Some of them have been there since dawn, mind you. Early that morning the householder went to the marketplace, to the corner where those without steady jobs hang out, and he hired a handful of them to work in his vineyard for the day. He offered them a denarius — a fair day's wage — and they agreed, but by nine in the morning it was clear that there was more work than they could do. So the householder went back to the corner again, and again at noon, and again at three in the afternoon, bringing more workers back with him each time, after promising to pay them whatever was right.

Finally, at five in the afternoon, with only one hour left before dark, he goes back to the corner and finds a few men still standing idle. Rounding them up, he takes them back to the vineyard, where they help the others finish up the day's work. Then comes the moment they have all been waiting for. The blazing sun goes down, a cool breeze stirs the dusk, and the householder calls his steward to give them all their pay.

Beginning with the last to be hired, he presses a denarius into each of their hands. When they gasp out loud, the others strain to see, and a murmur goes through the crowd. The householder has turned out to be a very generous man! If he pays the latecomers a whole denarius for just one hour's work, then those who arrived at dawn are about to be rich!

But before they can do the arithmetic in their heads, the steward has paid them all — one denarius, one denarius, one denarius — whether they came at dawn and slaved all day or showed up at five to work the last hour, their pay is the same, and the murmurs at the front of the line quickly turn to grumbling. "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us," say the first to be hired, their faces all sunburned and their clothes

sweated through. "You have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

That is when the householder reminds them that he has kept his part of the bargain, that he has paid them exactly what they agreed to be paid, and what business is it of theirs what he pays the others? The vineyard is his, the money is his. Isn't he allowed to do what he wants to with what belongs to him? "Or do you," he says, "begrudge my generosity?"

You bet they do. Like most human beings, they have an innate sense of what is fair and what is not. Equal pay for equal work is fair; equal pay for unequal work is not fair. Rewarding those who do the most work is fair; rewarding those who do the least is not fair. Treating everyone the same is fair; treating everyone the same when they are *not* the same is not fair.

Life is so often not fair. You have heard the stories: a state employee arrives at her desk early every morning, answering the telephone until her tardy co-workers appear. She skips lunch in order to catch up on the filing and stays late to fill out reports for her supervisor, who has learned that she is the only one in the department who knows what is going on. When annual raises are due, he calls her into his office and explains that, while she has done a superlative job, there will be no merit increases this year. Salaries will be increased across the board, with everyone receiving the same amount, because he thinks that will do more for group morale. It is not fair.

Or a man cares for his elderly mother, taking her into his own home when she becomes too frail to live by herself, and although he has three brothers and sisters, he rarely hears from them. They call from time to time to tell him how grateful they are, but none of them offers to help. "They have problems of their own," his mother tells him, patting his hand. "I just thank God for you." Then she dies, and suddenly the whole family appears, grieving as if they had been there all along. At the lawyer's office they are all ears. The man who has spent most of his savings caring for his mother sits and listens with his head in his hands as the will is read. "I leave my estate to be divided equally among my four dear children," it reads, "because I love them all the same." It is just not fair.

Life is not fair, which is why it seems all that much more important that God should be. God should be the *one* authority whom you can count on to reward people according to their efforts, who keeps track of how long you have worked and how hard you have worked and who does not let people break into line ahead of you. God should be the *one* manager who polices the line, walking up and down to make sure everyone stays where he or she belongs, so that the first remain first and the last wait their turns at the end of the line. Life may not be fair, but God should be.

But it is not so, according to today's story. According to today's story, God is the householder who puts the same amount of money into a stack of little white envelopes and instructs his steward to pass them out beginning at the *end* of the line, with those who arrived last and worked least. Moving from that end of the line toward the front, where those who arrived first and worked most are standing, the steward does what he is told, but depending on where he is in the line the response he gets is quite different.

At the end of the line, with the last and the least, there is a lot of cheering, a lot of laughter and backslapping, while nearer the front, with the first and the most, there is loud grumbling and great hostility, so that the steward hands over the envelopes faster and faster, ready to run for his life. In every case, the pay is the same — a fair day's wage — but how it is received depends entirely on what each man believes he *deserves*. Those who have gotten more than they think they deserve are jubilant, while those who have gotten less are furious. "Take what belongs to you, and go," the householder tells them. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

The most curious thing about this parable for me is where we locate ourselves in line. The story sounds quite different from the end of the line, after all, than it does from the front of the line; but isn't it interesting that ninety-nine percent of us hear it from front row seats? We are the ones who have gotten the short end of the stick; we are the ones who have been cheated. We are the ones who have gotten up early and worked hard and stayed late and all for what? So that some backward householder can come along and

start at the wrong end of the line, treating us just like the ne'er-do-wells who don't even get dressed until noon!

That is how most of us hear the parable, but it is entirely possible that we are mistaken about where we are in line. Did you ever think about that? It is entirely possible that, as far as God is concerned, we are halfway around the block, that there are all sorts of people ahead of us in line, people who are far more deserving of God's love than we are, people who have more stars in their crowns than we will ever have.

They are at the front of the line, and we are near the end of it for all sorts of reasons. No one told us about it, for one thing. We did not know there *was* a line until late in the day. But even if we had, we might not have done much about it. We know all kinds of things we do not do much about. There are so many things we mean to do that we never get around to doing, and there are so many things we mean not to do that we end up doing anyway. Even when we manage to do our best, things get in the way: people get sick, businesses fail, relationships go down the drain. There are a lot of reasons why people wind up at the end of the line, and only God can sort them all out.

But suppose for a moment that it is *you* back there, craning your neck for even a glimpse of the theatre, knowing you will never make it, that all the tickets will be gone long before you get there, and that you are about to have one more long hot afternoon on your hands while everyone else is laughing and eating popcorn inside the cool, dark theatre. It makes you want to cry; it makes you want to give up, when all of a sudden a stir goes through the crowd. The manager appears out of nowhere and walks right up to you, a stack of blue tickets in his hand. "We're starting at this end today," he says, handing you your ticket, and everyone at the end of the line begins to cheer.

God is not fair. For reasons we may never know, God seems to love us indiscriminately, and seems also to enjoy reversing the systems we set up to explain why God should love some of us more than others of us. By starting at the end of our lines, with the last and the least, God lets us know that his ways are not our ways, and that if we want to see things his way we might question our own

notions of what is fair, and why we get so upset when our lines do not work.

God is not fair, but depending on where you are in line that can sound like powerful good news, because if God is not fair then there is a chance that we will get paid more than we are worth, that we will get more than we deserve, that we will make it through the doors even though we are last in line — not because of who *we* are but because of who *God* is.

God is not fair; God is *generous*, and when we begrudge that generosity it is only because we have forgotten where we stand. On any given day of our lives, when the sun goes down and a cool breeze stirs the dusk, when the work is done and the steward heads toward the end of the line to hand out the pay, there is a very good chance that the cheers and backslapping, the laughter and gratitude with which he is greeted will turn out to be our own. Amen.

## JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

### The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Theologian Karl Barth once remarked that he wanted the biblical text to govern, as much as possible, both the content and the form of his sermons. Jürgen Moltmann learned a good deal of theology from Barth, and, as this sermon shows, he appears to have heeded his teacher Barth on matters homiletic as well. Indeed, "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector" tracks the form and content of the Lukan parable like a stylus in a groove. Almost every sentence of the sermon has been drawn from some feature of the text. Even the structure of the sermon grows out of the narrative shape of the text, as is shown by the division of the sermon into "scenes" based upon the dramatic texture of the parable.

---

"The Pharisee and the Tax Collector," from *The Power of the Powerless* by Jürgen Moltmann, pp. 88-97. English translation copyright © 1983 by SCM Press Ltd. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins, Publishers, Inc.