

2020-09-20 – Rev Esmā Collins-Marks

20 Matthew 20 - 1-16

It's hard to miss the hype of a TV show like American Idol or Britain's Got Talent. I haven't really paid much attention to them, but it caught my eye a some time ago. It has a lot of interesting elements: the fairy tale 'rags to riches' angle; the off-beat personalities; the actual talent that is sometimes good; the hopes and aspirations that are either encouraged or smashed. It's an interesting cultural exercise to watch. But I also found myself observing some spiritual lessons as the show unfolded. What I concluded is that, in some very significant ways, these shows represents the opposite of the character of God. Not that its unholy, necessarily. The shows really simply reflects our whole society's obsession with talent and achievement. Merit is praised and failure is scorned. If you have it, you're instantly popular. If you don't have it, you're a loser. That ideal shapes and affects much of how we think about ourselves, and sadly, it can colour our whole understanding of who God is and what he is like. I think, if you interviewed the "man on the street", most people think that God is a lot like the judges on these shows: he rewards those who are good and who measure up. But, in fact, the Bible reveals that God is a generous God who rewards us, not on the basis of our merit or achievement, but on the basis of his grace. The fact is, ability doesn't matter to God. Many people make the mistake of thinking that merit or worthiness counts with God.

The Matthew reading just before the Gospel story this morning reads "many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first". Now we look at verse 16 - we see a repetition of the same statement. "Everyone who is now first will be last, and everyone who is last will be first." Those two similar statements act as bookends, marking off this story. So its pretty clear that those statements define what this story is about, and it explains what Jesus said about the "first" and the "last".

The gist of the story is simple. All day long the landowner hires men to work in his vineyard. Some get hired first thing in the morning - they agree to be paid a denarius for the day. That's the basic wage for a day

labourer: let's say \$50. Others come to work at 9:00, some at noon. Some don't start until 3:00 and some don't even come until 5:00. They've been waiting in line all day hoping to get work. They just work one hour.

Here's the twist - the landowner decided to pay them all a full day's wage. They all got paid \$50 regardless of how long they worked. The last ones hired got paid first as the all-day crew watched. I think the story is told this way to put the focus on the ones hired first, because this raised their expectations. They thought: if that guy got \$50 for 1 hours' work, maybe they would get a lot more! But they all got paid the same! Of course, this raised the question of fairness in the minds of those who had worked all day long. How was it fair, they grumbled, for them to get the same as the guy who only worked one easy hour?

To draw an analogy, it would be like you worked really hard to prepare for your audition. You're an experienced vocalist with a lot of talent. You go in front of the judges and you knock 'em out. They announce: You're going to Hollywood! But when you leave your audition, you find out to your surprise that every single person who auditioned that day is going to Hollywood, too - the whole crowd! Some of them are pretty bad: they're off key, can't carry a tune. But they're going on to the final round the same as you! How do you feel?

This parable points out: those who are first - those who are capable, successful, intelligent, able, good, moral people - often find grace to be a scandal. The landowner says: "are you envious because I am generous?" People like that rich young landowner stumble over grace. The workers who worked all day long stumbled over grace. Religious, moral people, good citizens and good churchgoers today often stumble over grace. Because we think we have enough going for us to earn something from God. When God gives salvation or blessing away for free, we recoil because we were worthy; they were not. We paid our dues; they did not.

But let's think about it. Why do we think that we measure up? This parable shows - a lot of people who think they deserve something from God will be seriously disappointed. Again, the parable draws our attention to the statements just before and after it. People who are

“first” in this life - people who are successful, beautiful, capable, intelligent, you name it - these are the “winners” of the world. But many of them will find themselves at the end of the line in the life to come. Why? The tendency is: these people don’t see their need. They are self-sufficient and adequate. They have it all. Many are self-made men and women. So they have a hard time receiving God’s free gift of grace. By the same token, people who are last in this world - people who are broken, troubled, unsuccessful, poor, and so on - people who are considered in the world’s terms to be the losers: they will be at the front of the line in the life to come. They are more likely to find salvation - not all, but many. They will be received into eternal life ahead of those who, in the world’s perspective enjoy prominence now. Why? They don’t have any trouble seeing their need. They don’t have such a hard time humbling themselves: they’ve been humbled by life and by circumstances. So they don’t have such a struggle to receive God’s free gift of grace.

You see, from a Biblical perspective, none of us is worthy. It’s just that worldly success and prominence deceives us into thinking we are. Nobody measures up. I specifically chose American Idol and Britain’s Got Talent as an image this morning because those programmes represent the complete absence of grace. If you can’t perform, if you can’t cut it, then you will not advance. This is American Idolatry. Not the craving for fame or our worship of celebrity, although that is certainly an issue in our culture. But it’s the idolatry of merit, ability and success. You know, they let people in to audition who aren’t very good. In fact, some of them are embarrassingly bad. But they don’t let them in as an expression of grace. They let them in so that the viewers can mock them as a twisted form of entertainment.

This is the problem: churches are full of “good” people, at least measured against majority: we don’t steal or murder or swear or get drunk. But measured against God’s character and God’s law, we’re deceived about our own goodness. We’re not as worthy as we think we are. Our day’s work in the vineyard isn’t as impressive as we think. At least: God is not impressed. When God chooses to be generous, it isn’t about being worthy. It isn’t about paying dues. It’s not about how hard you worked all

day long. Its simply a matter of God's desire to freely give, whether it is deserved or not. Because God is a generous God.

You don't have to keep on trying to prove yourself to God. The fact is: you have nothing to prove. When Jesus comes back, he's going to reveal all the stuff in our lives that we denied or weren't even aware of. When he evaluates our lives, he's going to burst a lot of bubbles of people who think they're worthy. So: why not just admit it? Get rid of the whole mistaken notion of ability and merit. Come to God by grace. Enjoy his generosity. We have a far deeper, more enduring reason to rejoice. We know everything we have is a gift from God. We know: God accepts us, blesses us, gives us wonderful gifts, even when we are not worthy to have them. Amen.