

## Follow: Learning from Matthew to Live Like Jesus

Faith UMC Lent Bible Study, 2025

Week 4

### Matthew 20:1-16

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

<sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went.

<sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>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?” <sup>7</sup>They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.”

<sup>8</sup>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.”

<sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>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.” <sup>13</sup>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? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

<sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

### Co-Creators of the Kingdom

The call came at night. It was late August 2017. Hurricane Harvey had cruised into Houston, slammed on the brakes, and stalled. It wouldn’t stop raining for another four days. The flood was growing, creeping toward my front door like a liquid tumor invading all available space. I was trapped in our house. My family lived about four miles from my church, so I didn’t know if my church’s building or the neighborhood around my church was flooded or not- until the call came.

The call was from an unknown number, and the person on the other end of the line identified himself as a Houston firefighter. He said he found my cell phone number by calling my church’s fire alarm monitoring company and asking for the emergency contact. (This was how I learned I was the emergency contact.) The firefighter told me the following story.

Every available firefighter in Houston had volunteered to rescue people who were trapped in their homes, apartments, and vehicles. All the high-water rescue vehicles were deployed. Now the firefighters were using fire engines, vehicles that usually fight fire *with* water,

except in Harvey, they were being used to fight *against* water. The firefighter on the call was driving a fire engine and had rescued a group of stranded people from the rising floodwaters in the area around my church.

The problem was, the waters were so deep that the fire engines could not drive through them. That's right: the flooding was so deep on the roads around my church, even the fire engines were at risk of taking on water. The firefighter on the call said he almost lost the fire engine - and the group onboard – but he turned into my church's parking lot at the last minute. (This is when I learned our campus was high ground). Everyone onboard the fire engine needed drinking water and a bathroom. The firefighter was about to bust a window and break into the church, but he decided to call first.

I gave the firefighter my code to the keypad on our front door. Thank God, the keypad still worked. All the rescued folks were able to use the water fountains and the bathrooms in the church, and there they waited, safe in sanctuary, until the waters subsided enough for the fire engine to use the road again.

I didn't hesitate to say yes to the firefighter. In fact, I was excited, dare I say, *elated* to play a small role in a rescue mission to save human lives. Given there was nothing I could do to push Harvey out of Houston, it simply felt good to be part of an effort that was bigger than me, and yes, bigger than church.

When I told this story to my congregation the next Sunday, they clapped for joy. They were thrilled to hear their church building was used for a purpose beyond church. They would have been perfectly happy for the firefighter to bust the window, because the busted window would have served a higher purpose, a mission beyond the church itself.

I tell this story because it's a good illustration of what the church is *for*. The church doesn't exist for itself. The church's water fountains, bathrooms, windows, and parking lots do not exist for themselves. Ultimately, the church is a means to an end, an instrument to achieve a purpose beyond church. The church doesn't have missions. There's a mission, and the mission has a church.

Jesus gives this mission a name: the Kingdom of God. The church exists for the purpose of making the Kingdom of God real on earth as it already is in heaven.

Too often, Christians who have been Christian for a long time default to a church-centric mode of being Christian, where the end-goal of being a Christian is to keep the church in existence. Show up to worship, balance the budget, fill the committees, maintain the building, balance the spinning plates of a religious non-profit business- that's a church-centric mentality.

But the church exists for a purpose beyond church, and that purpose is the Kingdom of God. The very nature of church is Kingdom-centric, and followers of Jesus are meant to be Kingdom-centric, for Jesus himself was Kingdom-centric.

Jesus didn't start a church so church could be church. Jesus started a movement of the human species for the cause of the Kingdom on God on earth, and he called that movement "church."

It's to the Kingdom of God that we turn in our study of Matthew, for one of the markers of a life that follows Jesus is a commitment to Co-Creating the Kingdom with Jesus.

### **Software, Dr. King, and the Freedom March**

If the Sermon on the Mount is the first major teaching block from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (chapters 5-7), then the Kingdom of God is the first actual *sermon* in Matthew, and the preacher was John the Baptist.

John was a spectacular preacher with a following of his own. He held Billy Graham-type revivals in the Judean desert. These revivals, much like Billy Graham's crusades, had a magnetic appeal to people from all slices of society and attracted the rich and poor, rural and city folk alike. John's message was clear: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:2).

Not to be confused with "heaven" or the "afterlife," the Kingdom of heaven, also called the Kingdom of God, would be a new social and political reality for life on planet earth, where the one and only person in charge of all human affairs would be God in the flesh. John believed the day was coming soon when God would intervene in the course of human history, overthrow the governments and rulers of the world, and begin a new age where God's reign over the earth is universal, uncontested, and understood by all. The time to repent – *metanoia* in Matthew's original Greek, meaning a change of mind leading to a change of life – was now, given that God was coming soon and *very soon* and only the righteous, or those who truly follow God's ways of love, mercy, and justice, will be allowed to enter God's new age.

John reserved his harshest criticism for the religious people, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who wanted to be seen doing the socially acceptable thing by going to John's revivals in the wilderness but would not change a single thing about how they actually lived. John called these hypocrites "a brood of vipers," or the sons of snakes (Matthew 3:7), because God isn't interested in their brand of religion- a religion for looks. The Kingdom of God belongs to people who live now *as if* God was in charge now, meaning they allow God to direct every piece of their daily living, from the way they spend money to the way they treat other people to the way they use their time and energies to be useful to God's purposes.

After John was arrested for speaking publicly against Herod Antipas, the Rome-appointed ruler of Galilee, Jesus filled the void of leadership left behind by John and took up the mantle of the Kingdom movement. The first sermon by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is the same first sermon as his friend and mentor, John. Jesus uses the exact same words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17).

What was the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth about? Why did Jesus quit his job and start preaching and healing? Why did Jesus call followers of his own like John did? Because Jesus believed the Kingdom of God was coming and coming soon, and now – not tomorrow, not the afterlife, *now* – is the time to change our lives and live by Kingdom rules.

When I explain the Kingdom of God to people in my congregation, I like to reference three images. The first image is a software upgrade.

You know how your phone or computer will tell you when a new software update is available? The hardware of your device won’t change when the software changes. You’ll have the same screen, hard drive, and mouse pad as before. What changes is the software running the hardware. You can’t see the software update, but you can tell the software update was successful when the update is complete and you’re able to use the hardware differently.

The Kingdom of God is a software update for all of God’s creation. Creation is the hardware, and the way human beings interact with one another and the planet is the software. Our current software is and always been faulty. We tend to sin against one another, failing to bother to love. We tear down people instead of building them up. We keep violence, poverty, greed, and oppression in circulation from one generation to the next. We damage the good creation that God entrusted to us. What needs to happen is an entire software update, a comprehensive upgrade that fixes, once and for all time, the *way* human beings treat one another and creation.

Just imagine it- a world where all human beings choose to love God and love neighbor without being asked, and we make that choice always and everywhere, 100% of the time. Just imagine a world with no more homeless shelters, food pantries, prisons, refugee camps, borders, or standing armies, because we simply won’t need them anymore. Just imagine a world where God’s ways of love are the only ways human beings put into practice.

That is the Kingdom of God, God’s dream for creation as it should be. Instead of God *destroying the hardware* of creation and starting from scratch (that was the Noah approach in Genesis chapters 5-9), God is *updating the software* of creation, the ways in which human beings use the hardware. Jesus, like John, came to announce that the software update has already begun.

In 1948, Dr. King preached a sermon called “The Human Tension” where he compared the Isness of the world with the Oughtness of the world. “We are forever aware,” said King, “that the “isness” of our being is far from the “ought-ness” of our highest ideals. The “isness” of our present nature is out of proportion to the eternal “oughtness” forever confronting us.”<sup>1</sup> The Isness is “just the way the world is.” The Isness is homelessness, hunger, disease, hate, injustice and apathy to injustice.

But the Oughtness is “the way the world ought to be.” Oughtness is God’s dream of the Kingdom of God: it’s a world where everything is fixed. The Oughtness is what we pray for every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer: “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Dr. King’s dream was first Jesus’ dream: a closing of the gap between the Isness and the Oughtness, making things on earth as they already are in heaven. Jesus summons the church into being for the purpose of making the ideal Oughtness, the experienced Isness.

Earlier in Matthew, Simon becomes the first disciple to make a correct confession of faith in Jesus. Simon calls Jesus the “Messiah,” or God’s anointed King. Jesus rewards Simon’s faith by giving him a nickname, Peter, from the Greek word *petra*, meaning rock or stone. Simon is now “The Stone.” Jesus says, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 17:18).

The English translation of church comes from *ekklesia*, meaning “assembly,” but this assembly is not static or staying still. This assembly is on the move; it’s going somewhere, which is why another translation of *ekklesia* is “movement.” Jesus’ vision of church is a movement of humanity on the offense against the very gates of hell. It’s not like the gates of hell can hold us in. Far from it- the church is on the march against the forces of hell on earth, and hell doesn’t stand a chance.

Years ago, I was part of a march. I took to the streets, along with thousands of others, to protest the senseless murder of an African American man. The protest was peaceful but not quiet. The protestors held up hand-drawn posters and yelled, “No justice, no peace!” Along the way, I saw police officers and protestors hugging each other and marching together. The mass of humanity on the street that day could not have been more diverse, but we all agreed that what happened to the man was wrong- just plain wrong. The march ended at city hall. The physical march of thousands of people moving in the same direction was a metaphor for a symbolic march happening at the same time: we were all marching for freedom.

The church is a Freedom March. We’re marching for freedom from the powers of hell on earth, the forces of sin, evil, and death itself, and freedom *for* an abundant life for all God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/human-tension#fn6>

children. This march needs a direction, a place where the march will end up, a symbolic city hall. Our march ends with the Kingdom of God, the dream of earth as it is in heaven. The dream has already begun to take shape, but like a long march to freedom, no one knows how long it will take to land at God's dream fulfilled. Until that day, the church as Jesus' worldwide movement has a calling to work beyond itself for the spread of the Kingdom everywhere.

We are Co-Creators with Jesus of the future God already sees, a future that is sure and certain, a future already begun with the birth of Christ yet incomplete until Christ's return, a future we point to with our very lives and build with every word and deed, a future Christ is already reigning over, summoning us to come and see. We are Co-Creators of the Kingdom.

We can only speak of the Kingdom of God in metaphor, for the Kingdom is a vision, a dream, and one can only speak of dreams through symbols. So far, we've used three symbols for the Kingdom of God: a software update for creation, the Oughtness, and the goal of a Freedom March.

Jesus, too, uses symbols for the Kingdom dream. Jesus paints vivid pictures of these symbols, but instead of strokes of pigment, Jesus paints with stories. Jesus calls these stories parables.

A parable is a short story with a huge meaning. The word parable (Greek, *parabola*) means "thrown alongside." Next to each parable of Jesus is a world-changing meaning thrown alongside it. There's the story itself, the words that make up the parable; then there's the symbolic meaning of the story.

Most of Jesus' parables point to what the Kingdom of God means for the world. Jesus was a master storyteller who used short stories the way a poet uses the written word: for communicating a vision of a world that doesn't exist yet, a vision that defies exact description, a vision originating in God's mind and spoken on Jesus' lips, a vision that can only be transmitted from human brain to another through symbols. The parables in the Gospels are the symbols Jesus chose to communicate the Kingdom of God.

For the rest of this lesson, we'll take a close look at one of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, where we find four qualities of a Co-Creator of the Kingdom of God.

### **Buy the Thin Mints**

What is the Kingdom of God like? In a word, generosity. The Kingdom of God is found where people give generously as God gives generously.

Jesus compares the Kingdom to a person who owns a large vineyard. The person must be a symbol for God, given one of the repeated symbols for the people of Israel in the Old Testament is a vineyard, owned and planted by God. Here's the vineyard symbol being used by the prophet Isaiah:

Let me sing for my beloved  
my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
He dug it and cleared it of stones,  
and planted it with choice vines;  
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it,  
and hewed out a wine vat in it;  
he expected it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes (Isaiah 5:1-2).

Isaiah is the speaker, God is the beloved, and Israel is the vineyard. Israel was supposed to yield sweet grapes for delicious wine, a symbol for righteousness through keeping God's commandments. But instead, Israel produced wild grapes that made bitter wine, a symbol for Israel straying from the path of righteousness. Jesus picks up vineyard symbol and uses it as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God.

In the parable, the landowner (God) recruits day laborers to harvest grapes off the vine. The day laborers wait all day in the marketplace for an employer to hire them. Today, this is an everyday scene at the big-box hardware store close to my house. Men show up early in the morning to the same spot in the parking lot. The spot isn't marked for this purpose; the men just happen to know where to show up. An employer, usually a builder or a contractor needing manual labor, will drive up to the group of men and hire as many as are needed to accomplish the job for that day. If you're not hired by the first employer, you wait for the second- then the third, then the fourth, and so on. There are days when I drive by the hardware store close to dinnertime and the huddle of men is still here, waiting to be picked up for late-night construction work, if anyone shows up to hire them at all. No work or pay is guaranteed to these men for the following day. All these men have is hope for today, hope that someone will come along and hire them and pay them for an honest day's work. Such is the hope imbedded in the prayer: "give us our *daily* bread."

Day labor like this was as common in Jesus' time as it was in ours. In the time of Jesus, the day labor was for agriculture: for example, picking grapes at harvest time. The day laborers in the parable expect to be paid a full day's wage for a full day's worth of work in the vineyard. The daily wage was a Roman denarius, one metal coin.

Imagine the shock of the men who were hired first when they received the same pay as the men who were hired last! Each day laborer in the parable receives one denarius. The reader assumes, as did the day laborers, that more work equals more pay, but that assumption doesn't take into account the generosity of the landowner. The landowner doesn't cheat the men who were hired first; they receive the same compensation they agreed to work for. Instead, the landowner is generous – *ridiculously generous* – to the day laborers who were hired last. The last receive the same compensation as the first.

It doesn't make good business sense to pay an employee for time they didn't work and for work they didn't do. But that's what makes the generosity of the landowner so ridiculous. The landowner is generous against all reasonable business sense. The landowner – and remember, this is God we're talking about – simply chooses to be generous, and that's that.

The day laborers are symbols for disciples of Jesus. They're supposed to be you and me. That means we are first and foremost recipients of God's generosity. God is ridiculously generous to us! God forgives us of our sins, meets our every need, gives us water from the sky and plenty of oxygen, people to love and people who find it in their hearts to love us, food on our plates and food for filling up the plates of the poor. As the hymn goes, "All I have needed, thy hand hath provided. Great is thy faithfulness!" God is the origin of all generosity.

Therefore, one of the markers of God's reign on earth, and one of the expectations of a disciple of Jesus who lives *as if* God's reign has already begun, must be generosity. The Kingdom of God belongs to open-handed givers.

One of the best pieces of advice I ever received was this: always buy the Thin Mints. Or, put differently, when you see the Girl Scouts pushing Girl Scout cookies outside the grocery store or in the church parking lot, always, *always* buy the Girl Scout cookies, because buying the Girl Scouts is about being generous to the Girl Scouts. I heard this advice from a pastor, who heard it first from a friend. The friend said, "Girl Scout cookies are good for you." This kind of "good for you" has nothing to do with nutrition. This "good for you" has to do with the heart. When we're generous to causes we care about, our hearts draw closer to those causes. When we're generous to the people we love and people we want to love more, our hearts draw closer to those people. Generosity is a leading edge of the heart. Generosity drives our hearts closer to where God wants them to be.

Imagine a world where everyone is generous like this. Imagine the entire human species being open-handed with their time, treasures, and talent. Imagine all of God's children being ridiculously generous with their resources - and yes, that means money - for the benefit of all of



God's children. Such a world is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "The Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early..."

We tend to think of economics in terms of ROI, Return on Investment. We spend money when we expect to receive an equal or greater value in return. We *won't* spend money when we don't expect to receive a return on the money we spent. I had a friend (I'm almost sorry to say) in college who refused to leave a tip at a restaurant. I remember sitting at the dinner table with him, and when the check came, he left the tip line blank and signed his name underneath. Unprompted by me, as if to justify himself, he said, "I don't understand why people leave tips. It's such a waste of money." He was thinking in terms of Return on Investment. In his eyes, any financial expense on his part that didn't benefit him in return was a waste.

But that's exactly the point of generosity: it *is* a waste of money. By wasteful, I don't mean throwing money in the garbage. I mean giving money away without thought of return. The gift may feel like a waste to the giver, but to the receiver – to the day laborer hired late, to the waiter working for tips – it's treasure. There's a marvelous word for this in English. It's the word *profligate*. Profligate means generosity to the point of wastefulness. The Kingdom of God is a dream of profligate people, where everyone is open-handed to the point of throwing their resources at one another.

The first parable in the Gospel of Matthew is the Parable of the Sower. "Listen! A sower went out to sow" (Matthew 13:3). The sower is supposed to be disciples of Jesus, and the seeds scattered by the sower is the word of God, or the preaching of the gospel by people like you and me. In the parable, some of the seed never takes root, some of the seed is choked out by thorns, some of the seed grows like a weed and dies quickly, and some of the seed grows to maturity and yields an abundant harvest.

The parable is a symbol for how Christians are to preach the gospel in word and deed. Some, if not most, of the seeds we plant will never take root in people, and if they do, the message of the gospel just might wither and die. But it's not for us to know if the gospel will take root in people. It's for us to sow. It's for us to broadcast huge handfuls of the gospel far and wide, loving people as Jesus loved them, giving our lives away as Jesus gave his. It's for us to be profligate with our love, generous with our very lives to the point of wastefulness. That's Kingdom living- no thought of return on investment, only generosity driving the heart closer to the heart of God.

### **"Let Both of Them Grow Together"**

Another marker of the Kingdom of God is equality. Followers of Jesus are called to co-create a future with Jesus where equality isn't just a value, it's the reality. Of course, all people

are equal in the sight of God, but we don't treat people that way. One way of knowing someone is living by Kingdom rules is if they treat people as equals.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard ends with this punchline: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:16). The first ones to be hired by the landowner receive the same daily wage as the last ones hired. Though they start working at different times, they wind up in the same place: as equals.

It's a prediction of the equality of all human beings in the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom, the "last," meaning the least and lowest of people – the poor, the downtrodden, the humble and humbled – will be the first, and the "first," meaning the powerful and highest of people, will be the last. The least of these will be exalted, and the exalted of human society will be humbled. Both ends of the spectrum will meet up at the same place: as equals. As equal as humans already are in the sight of God, so will all human beings be *to one another* in the Kingdom.

As I was planning this lesson, I boarded an airplane with my family for a Spring break vacation. We weren't the first ones to step onto the plane. By the time our family of four took our seats, the plane was already halfway full. As the plane filled up with passengers, I noticed people were less kind to one another, less patient and overall grumpier. This airline is the kind that doesn't assign seats; it's first come, first served. That means the passengers who boarded last got the least desirable seats: the dreaded middle seat and the seats farthest from the exit. I noticed passengers who were already seated putting their bags in the middle seat next to them, as if the bag would deter the latecomer passengers from sitting next to them. Passengers struggling to find an open seat would nudge the person in front of them with their carry-on luggage, as if the nudge would force the person to find a seat quicker. People were sighing loudly, plainly frustrated that the latecomer passengers were holding back the plane from taking off. A flight attendant spoke over the loudspeaker: "It doesn't matter where you sit. We're all going to the same place."

Preach on, lady. We're all going to the same place. Everyone has an expiration date. Everyone will meet God face-to-face, no matter where we find ourselves on the social ladder. Equality is the destiny of all human beings. Death will greet us all, and so will life on the other side. We might as well treat one another as equals while we have time. The people who can do that, those who can postpone indefinitely the preferential treatment of rich over poor, the haves over the have not's, the least of these over the first of these, those who see equals where the world sees "better than" and "less than," it is to these that the Kingdom of God belongs.

Jesus tells several parables about equality. The Parable of the Wheat and the Chaff (Matthew 13:24-30) and the Parable of the Dragnet (Matthew 13:47-50) are about treating people as equals and withholding judgement. It is not for us to separate the wheat (the good

people) from the chaff (the bad people). Jesus says, “Let both of them grow together (Matthew 13:30). God doesn’t distinguish between good people and bad people: God simply lets us grow together. That means we’re to treat people as people, period. Let God do the judging when the Kingdom comes. Likewise, it is not for us to throw out the fish we label as “bad” from the daily catch. Rather, we’re to “catch fish of every kind” (Matthew 13:47), meaning, we’re to include all people in our daily catch of love, showing respect for all and judging none.

The call to equality, therefore, is an answer to the human tendency to judge people. In the Kingdom of God, human beings do not sit in judgement over one another. Kingdom-minded people put down the judging and pick up the seeing one another as equals.

### **Stay Humble**

The third marker of a Co-Creator of the Kingdom is humility. The day laborers who worked longer hours were humbled, and the ones who were hired the earliest were the ones who were most humbled. They could almost taste the bonus check waiting for them at the end of a long, hot day. But no bonus check came, only a slice of humble pie.

Jesus tells the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard immediately before his third and final reminder to the disciples that he must suffer and die in Jerusalem, and on the third day be raised from the dead (Matthew 20:17-19). Jesus tells them *explicitly* what awaits him in Jerusalem: humiliation. Jesus will be humbled. Jesus will be taken down to the lowest of the low, then be raised up to the highest of highs.

Then, two of the disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, along with their mother, have the audacity to ask Jesus for seats of power when Jesus comes into his Kingdom. “Declare that these two sons of mine,” says Mama Zebedee, “will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” (Matthew 20:21). Essentially, the request is for James and John to become the CEO and the Executive Director of the new government that Jesus will install, when Jesus marches into Jerusalem, kicks out the Romans, and takes charge. But Jesus serves up more humble pie: “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26-28). In other words, greatness in the Kingdom of God is not a measure of how much power you have *over* people; greatness in the Kingdom of God is measured by humble service *for* people, and we’d better get used to it.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,” said Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5). Jesus tried to help the disciples understand, from the very beginning of their three-year adventure with him, that the Kingdom of God belongs to the humble. It’s what Peter couldn’t understand when Jesus announced for the first time that he must suffer and die. Peter said, “God forbid it!” To which Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matthew 16:22, 23)

Peter couldn't wrap his mind around a humble King. Humility is for losers and pushovers, right? But no- the way of Jesus, the way of the Kingdom, and the way of Co-Creators of the Kingdom, is humility, for winning in the Kingdom of God is measured by humility.

As a United Methodist pastor, I was ordained as clergy by my bishop in 2016. I was supposed to kneel in front of my bishop, and my bishop would put her hands on my head and say, "Take thou authority." It's a powerful moment, when the Holy Spirit grants a person the power, the *authority*, to proclaim the gospel in the name of Christ's church.

Or it would have been, because this didn't happen to me. I fainted at my ordination. I was recovering from food poisoning, I was dehydrated, so when I stood for the Apostle's Creed after the bishop's sermon, I lost consciousness and woke up to people fanning me with their bulletins. The paramedics were called. I was put on a stretcher. The bishop finished the ordination service and found me in a side room of the conference center, where thousands of people had watched me being dragged out of the room. As I lay prostrate on the stretcher, my clergy robe tossed on the ground and my shirt unbuttoned so the paramedics could hook me up to an EKG machine, the bishop laid her hands on my head and said, "Take thou authority."

My ordination was a humiliating experience. I was humbled in the very moment I thought would be the proudest moment of my life. But no- I was served a slice of humble pie, and over a decade later, my ministry is better for it.

The power of a clergy person, and indeed the only real power a pastor has, and to be sure, the power of a follower of Christ, is the power of humility. A follower of Christ serves as one with no power *over* people, but as one of the least of these who lives *for* other people. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who toss aside the pursuit of success, significance, and sway over people and allows these worldly measures to lay crumbled on the floor like my clergy robe beside my stretcher. The Kingdom of God belongs to those who pick up a life of humble service. It's the only power that exists in God's dream world.

### **The Joy of the Last**

Let's end this lesson with the joy of the day laborers who were chosen last. Let's put ourselves in their sandals.

These men had waited in the market-place all day long. They're exhausted, not from work but from boredom and disappointment at missing out on a day's wage. The landowner comes along and hires them, and they work one hour, only *one hour*. They walk up to the manager of the vineyard and assume they will receive little to no pay. It all depends on the landowner. The landowner, if he's cruel, could say, "No pay for you today. Go home and I'll choose you for work tomorrow," but with no guarantee. But then, surprise! The manager places a

denarius in each of their palms. A whole day's pay for an hour's work. Wow! Those who were hired first in the day would have been furious, but those chosen last are joyful, almost as joyful as the landowner is generous.

What is the Kingdom of God like? Joy. The Kingdom of God is like a day laborer jumping for joy at being given a full day's wage when he should have received little to nothing. Another word for this joy is *gladness*. The Kingdom of God is chock-full of glad people: humans who give thanks to God with joyful hearts for all the precious gifts of life and the unrepeatable gift that is life. Those who live by Kingdom rules approach life as gift, not as payment. We're owed nothing. All of life is gift.

I officiated a wedding of two young people, both children of African refugee camps, having been born in those camps and, years later, won the lottery to enter the United States as immigrants with official refugee status. The wedding took place in a tall steeple sanctuary, where the weddings are stuffy affairs with pipe organ, carefully choreographed bridal parties, and an air of seriousness like a tragic funeral. But these were Congolese refugees from a culture where weddings are over-the-top, loud, and full of dancing and singing. The bridal party danced, they literally *danced* down the center aisle of the church. The music was so loud, I probably have ear damage. The wedding guests stood and clapped as the bridal party danced for a solid ten minutes down the center aisle. It was joy- pure, unfiltered joy, a joy borne of gladness, the gladness shared between the happy couple and the gladness for the happy couple.

The Kingdom of God belongs to the glad, those who choose joy despite the darkness and struggle around us, like a day laborer who gives thanks for the small coin in his hand, barely enough for daily bread, but glad all the same because, after all, it could be less. Generosity, equality, humility, and joy: there could be more markers of a Co-Creator of the Kingdom, but it's a good start. Followers of Jesus devote their lives to these four ways of Kingdom-living, for these ways will eventually be the *only ways there are*, when the software upgrade is complete and Jesus dances down the aisle again.

## Leader Guide

Ask someone to read Matthew 20:1-16. Ask if there are any initial questions or inspirations in reaction to the text.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. David opens the lesson with a story about using the church building for a purpose beyond church itself. This purpose doesn't maintain the church or benefit the church in any way. It's for a cause beyond church. When have you see a church – hopefully your church! – serve a purpose beyond church without directly benefiting the church?
2. Early in the lesson is this quote: “Ultimately, the church is a means to an end, an instrument to achieve a purpose beyond church. The church doesn't have missions. There's a mission, and the mission has a church. Jesus gives this mission a name: the Kingdom of God.” Unpack these sentences together as a group. What does it mean that the church is a “means to an end?” Do you agree with this? Why might someone disagree with this?
3. David uses three images to describe the Kingdom of God: a software upgrade, Dr. King's vision of the Oughtness, and the goal of a Freedom march. How do each of these images work as symbols for the Kingdom? How do they fall short?
4. Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God through symbols, and the form of symbol is storytelling. The parables of Jesus are short stories with huge meanings. Each story contains several symbols for what the Kingdom of God is and how the Kingdom works. Why do you think Jesus speaks in parables? Why doesn't Jesus simply explain himself plainly?
5. One of the markers of a Co-Creator of the Kingdom is generosity. The Kingdom of God belongs to generous givers. Where do you see generosity in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard?
6. What are barriers to generosity in your own life? What prevents us from being more like the landowner, who is open-handed with his generosity?
7. Another marker of a Co-Creator of the Kingdom is equality. Where do you see equality in this parable?
8. Where do you see the *lack* of equality in the world around you? These gaps are important to notice because they call attention to the work ahead of us, as we work for the Kingdom as followers of Christ.
9. Where do you see humility in the parable? David says that humility is the power of a follower of Christ. What does that mean? How does humility function as a gift or a “superpower” of a disciple?

10. Where do you see joy, or gladness, in the parable? What is one thing – aim for just one thing! – that you can do this week that will lead to more gladness?