

Part XIII: Who's On First?
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Abbot and Costello's comedy routine, "Who's On First?" was named by *Time* magazine as "the best comedy routine of the 20th century." Whether or not that vaudeville-shaped humor is funny to us, it does have a place in our culture. I found out that Abbot and Costello did not actually create the routine. Versions of it were performed by others, some of whom have claimed to have written it. But, Abbot and Costello were the ones who made it famous, and it made them famous, too. If you don't know the routine, it is about someone trying to find out the names of baseball players by position – players with odd names like Who, What, I Don't Know, and Why. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZksQd2fC6Y)

As we come to the end of our series of messages called "Life Stories," based on the parables of Jesus, today's message takes its title from this comedy routine, "Who's On First." And while those who first heard this parable probably would *not* call it "the best comedy routine of the first century", it does have some strange things going on which would seem unusual to them. For example, it ends with the words, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:16, NIV) These same words are found right before this parable is told, forming literary bookends to this parable. It may not answer the question, "Who's on first?" but it does try to explain what Jesus means when he says, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

This parable is about a landowner who need laborers to work his vineyard, probably for the harvest. Day laborers were paid a common wage for a day's work. It was not a lot of money, but it might help put bread on the table for the worker and his family. The landowner hires the first crew at 9 a.m. with a verbal contract. He will pay the going rate for one day's work and all agree. But for some reason, the landowner keeps going back to where the laborers were hired to get more workers – at noon, 3 p.m., and even at 5 p.m. – only one hour before the work day would end. But, there was no agreement with these other workers – they were just going to be paid whatever the landowner decided.

At the end of the day, the landowner instructs his foreman to pay the workers, but to begin with those who were hired last, not first. It was kind of like escorting out the mothers at a wedding – last in, first out. Those hired first observe all of this and expect to be paid more because they had worked more hours -- but that is not what happens. Like the other workers, those hired first are also paid a day's wage – as agreed upon. They start to grumble because they think it is only fair that they be paid more because they worked more. But, the landowner said they were paid exactly what they agreed to, and adds that he was being fair. What they seem to want was to be paid more – or, for the others to be paid less.

So, what is going on here? On the surface, we may identify with the grumbling workers who think that this is not fair. Some have tried to explain all of this by saying that maybe the late-coming workers were more efficient or worked harder, but we don't know that for sure. Others

have noted that when it comes to the harvest, particularly of grapes, there is a tiny window of time when the grapes have to be harvested -- often just a matter of days, or the grapes will be ruined. Maybe bad weather was coming and the landowner just needed the job done now. He was willing to pay whatever it takes to get the job done. It was just supply and demand -- with the demand for workers increasing by the hour -- so their price went up.

Or, suppose the landowner saw that the job was actually bigger than he first thought, so he needed to hire more workers to help those who started first. Maybe the grumblers should have been glad for the extra help.

Something similar has happened with our Atlanta Braves, and all of the other teams now in contention. They have traded for extra good players from teams that are not winning, to help the Braves in this final push to win it all. Ender Inciarte, the Braves center fielder who won a gold glove last year and had a career year in hitting, was not hitting well this year -- especially left-handed pitchers. So, the Braves traded for an outfielder and told Ender he would now alternate with the other player, depending on who was pitching against the Braves. I so admired Ender's attitude. He did not care about himself -- he just wanted to do whatever the team thought was best to get to the playoffs. In fact, the whole team seems to be glad for the new players. And if the team were to win it all -- everyone would get World Series Championship rings -- even the new guys. The goal was to get the job done -- whatever it takes. So, maybe the grumblers in our parable should be more focused on the "team" and finishing the goal -- rather than getting more for themselves.

Instead, we see an attitude that has appeared in other sports. For example, someone signs a big multiyear, multimillion dollar contract that puts the player at the top of the league. But, then a few years later, someone else signs a bigger contract, and suddenly the first player wants more -- even though both parties agreed to a certain amount. "Re-negotiating a contract" is what it is called, and that may be what the grumbling workers want to do -- re-negotiate their contract because market conditions changed. However, those are all ways to try and explain this parable in terms of what is "fair" -- assuming that what the landowner did was *not* fair.

Maybe we may think that idea of fairness is similar to what we may have heard about fairness this week in stories about the late Senator John McCain. One story that is a testament to his character concerned what happened when his plane was shot down over North Vietnam. He sustained broken limbs and was quickly captured by the North Vietnamese. He did not even get medical attention until they found out he came from a well-known, high profile American family. He was held in the prison nicknamed "The Hanoi Hilton." But, he was offered to be returned home because of the possible publicity value. However, McCain declined to be allowed to go home because of "the code" that the first prisoners captured would be allowed to go home first. So, he spent years of imprisonment and torture when he could have gone home -- all because he did not think it was fair for him to go first. That is brave and admirable, but I don't think that is the same kind of fairness we find at work in this parable.

In our parable, the grumblers had received all they were promised, but they wanted *more* -- or, for others to get *less*. In a sense, they wanted everyone to have to go through the same things they went through -- to work as long as they had. But, to return to the John McCain story --

suppose when McCain was captured, the North Vietnamese decided to let everyone return home – all at one time. Do you think any longer-term prisoner would have said, “No, that’s not fair! Those who have not been here for five years have to stay here, just like we did, before they can go home”? Of course not. Everyone would have been glad for everyone to get out of that prison. That was the goal – to be set free and to go home.

In the parable, it was not really about everyone getting the same amount in relation to everyone else. Instead, I think it was about two other things: getting the job done of harvesting the grapes on time and everyone getting enough to feed their families. Maybe the grumblers could have been more like the Braves players who have been on the team all year -- who are just excited to get more players to help them get to the payoffs. Or, they could be like those in a prison camp, who would be thrilled when everyone gets to go home at the same time, regardless of when they arrived.

Since this parable about God’s kingdom and God’s grace – then that is at the core of this parable. But, getting our fair share – which implies getting more than someone else – is not about God’s kingdom and God’s grace. That is about trying to earn one’s way into God’s kingdom. But, God’s grace is for everyone, and it has nothing to do with how good or productive we are. *Grace is the gift of God’s unconditional love. It is nothing we can ever earn – it can only be received with thanksgiving.* And insisting that we are somehow “first” or ahead of others, really makes no sense when the goal is to set people free from the prisons of sin and death.

Now, maybe we do relate to the grumblers -- but my guess is that no one really wants to live their lives in that way. On the other hand, maybe we relate to the latecomers. Perhaps we are brand new to this way of following Christ. We are just glad that there is a way in for those of us who haven’t spent years always trying to do the right thing. Maybe we are glad it is not about being “good enough” -- or at least better than someone else. You see, grace is a real “get-out-of-jail-free” card, and we can only say, “thank you” to God for it.

On the other hand, even the grumblers need to realize that when it all comes down to it, we are all like the late-coming workers. We all are forgiven and accepted in the sight of God because of grace, but not because we earned it. It just doesn’t work that way. And insisting on God being fair on *our* terms really makes no sense, because “our” terms or rules don’t matter. Only God, who created the whole game – and only God’s terms and rules matter. So, refusing God’s grace by insisting that the whole world march to our drummer is simply choosing to separate ourselves from God’s love and grace. God’s grace just doesn’t work that way!

However, maybe we relate to the landowner in the parable. Not only was the landowner fair – following through on exactly what he agreed to do – he was also generous, by giving the latecomers even more than they actually deserved.

Suppose you were one of the first workers hired in this story, but your brother-in-law, your sister’s husband, was not around to get hired first. Maybe he had a family emergency to take care of at home, or he was at another location looking for work so he could feed his family that day. But, then you find out later that he *was* hired at the very last moment, at 5 p.m., but the landowner paid him for the whole day! Now your sister and her children can have something to

eat that night. Would you say, “Hey, brother-in-law, that’s not fair”? Or, would you say, “That is great! The landowner was so generous that he gave him enough money to feed my sister and her kids – praise God!”

If we relate to the landowner in that story, then maybe we have both the resources and the generosity to help others. And like the landowner, we will use whatever we have been given to help as many people as we can to find work, so they can support their families. In the parable, those without work are not lazy – they wanted to work. They tell the landowner that they are ready to work, but that no one will hire them. So, the landowner had the means and the compassion to hire them. If we want to be fair and generous like the landowner in this story, then we will look for ways to find work for those who want to work. And for those of us who have ever wanted work but could not find a job, we know how hard that can be – especially if we are supporting others.

Face it, many of us, maybe most of us, have resources we could use for things like this. Of course, we would say that we have worked hard to get where we are -- and most of us have. But, we have also probably have been given great opportunities in life for education and other benefits that we received from others – parents, life situations – or simply being born in this country, or being able to come to this great nation.

There is a quote that has been attributed to former football coach Barry Switzer, but others have also said it: “Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple.” Friends, however we got to third base, the point is this: *do we care about who’s on first?* How do we treat those who come after us? The main goal is not that they stay behind us on the base paths of life. The goal is that we *all* get across home plate. Or to put it another way, the goal is to get everyone out of the prisons of sin and death – and not insisting that everyone do their time and wait their turn so no one gets ahead of us.

This Lord’s Supper is a symbol of God’s grace. When Jesus broke bread with those around him, he ate with everyone – from the religious leaders like the Pharisees who were “on top,” to the tax collectors, sinners, and outcasts who were perceived to be “on the bottom.” His goal was to get everyone to the table and to get everyone into God’s kingdom. So, this meal is all about grace. Notice that we don’t invite people to come to the table and line up in order of how good they are or how long they have been members of this church. We invite those who are in need of grace to come – which is everyone! Friends, God had shown this grace to you. So, how will you share it with others?

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.