

Context is Everything
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When it comes to understanding meaning, context is important. When something is taken out of context, it can mean the exact opposite of what was intended. We see this in some of the political ads in which we are now drowning. For example, an ad may quote one politician saying something outrageous, and if it is somebody we may be voting for, we may take the time to do some real research to find out if it's true. We may find out that the person said exactly the opposite of what was reported because it was taken out of context. They may have even said something like, "I would never say so and so" but the quote leaves off the first part. It is taken out of context.

When it comes to reading the Bible, context is equally as important, if not more so. And while it is helpful to remember a particular verse of scripture, most of the time we need to read the whole passage in order to understand the context and its meaning. Today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew, which ends with a familiar verse we may know, "the last will be first, and the first will be last" is also a passage in which context is very important -- both for what comes *before* this passage and for what happens *within* the passage. These are the words of Jesus found in Matthew 20:1-16:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (NIV)

Over the years, I have preached many times on this passage and taught it in Bible studies. When I teach it in Bible studies, I often ask something like "What jumps out at you in this passage?" Most of the time people will talk about the fact that it doesn't seem fair. They relate more to the

perspective of the workers in this story who worked a whole day, but received only the same amount of money as those who work part of the day, even though those were the wages they agreed to. My sense is that if we read this from our context, most of us would feel the same. We resonate when we hear someone say “They make money the old-fashioned way -- they earn it.” What is really going on here that leads Jesus to end his telling of this parable with the familiar verse, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last?”

To answer that, we need to look at the larger context of this passage as it is found in Matthew's gospel. If you have your Bible, look at what story comes right before this. It is a story about a rich, young man. *Rich* and *young* -- add the word “handsome” or “beautiful” and you've got the perfect trifecta! Today, if you are rich and young, you may not even have to be handsome or beautiful to find somebody who wants to be with you. You may not even have to be young! Doesn't everybody want to be rich and young -- like those who created the right product at the right time and who now have unbelievable wealth? Rich and young.

So, the rich young man comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, which he said he has done. Like last week, when we talked about “keeping score” this rich young man would appear to have “scored” well in life when it comes to the commandments, so what else is there? He asks Jesus what he still lacks, and Jesus responds, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21, NIV) But when the rich young man hears this, he goes away sad because he had great wealth.

It is after that encounter that we find the parable we have just read. It appears to be about someone else who is rich -- a *rich* landowner who has enough money to hire many workers on the spot. The rich young man, when told to sell his possessions and give it to the poor, apparently chooses not to do that. But what does this rich landowner do?

First, he begins the day finding workers standing in the marketplace doing nothing -- an interesting way to describe those who had no work. So, he gives them a job, agreeing to pay them a denarius a day. That was the going rate for a day laborer, but it was a subsistence level of income -- particularly if one had to support a family. In other words, it was enough to get by. The landowner goes back to the same place where the workers were standing in the marketplace doing nothing, and again at noon, and at three in the afternoon, and even at 5:00 in the afternoon. He asks them why they're standing there all day long doing nothing and they say because no one is hiring. So, he hires them -- at 5:00 in the afternoon!

Soon after that at the end of the day, he tells the foreman to pay everyone beginning with the last ones hired. He pays them the denarius, but he also pays everyone else the exact same -- what they agreed to. Those who were hired earlier thought they were going to get paid more, but that's not the case. They don't like it and they complain to the landowner. He asked them if they remembered what they agreed to work for and says that he gave them what they agreed to. Then he asked somewhat rhetorically, “Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?” And then he adds one more telling question: “Or are you envious because I am generous?” It is then that he sums it up by saying, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” -- as one way of saying what the kingdom of heaven is like.

From our context, we may tend to view it from an individualistic perspective -- it's about making sure we get what we think we deserve. But from the landowner's context, which we could make

the case represents God's perspective, he seems more concerned about something else. Why would a landowner go to the place where people were standing in the market with nothing to do again and again and again? It doesn't seem very efficient. There's no indication that the work expanded, so that he needed more workers. No, I think he's going there because he knows these workers need work to support themselves and perhaps their wives and children. They are not getting rich off of this work -- it is simply enough for them to get by. It's like a daily minimum wage. That is how this rich landowner uses his wealth. It is how he chooses to help the poor.

Last time I checked, here in Johns Creek we live in the most affluent area in the state of Georgia, in the most affluent country in the world. It may not feel that way, and this pandemic has certainly affected the economic context of many of us -- but based on our average income compared to the rest of the world, we are still "rich." So, what do we choose to do with our wealth? And from whose perspective will we choose to see our world? The rich young man's? The workers who thought they didn't get enough? Or, the landowner who used his wealth to make a difference in the lives of others? And what about the perspective of those who were hired last and still got the same as everyone else? Finally, how will we let our immediate context affect how we see things and what we choose to do?

Suppose in a few months, when November rolls around, you decide to vote in person. You want to make sure your vote counts, so you show up at the polls early, perhaps wearing a T-shirt of your favorite candidate, hoping you might encourage others to vote your way. You've been standing in line a long time because a lot of other people are voting too, when somebody working the polling place walks by and tells those waiting that because the line is so long, some folks may not get in before the polls close. You hear some grumbling in line. But you are determined to stand and wait, hoping to get your vote counted because this is an important election, as we all know.

While you're standing there, you notice an older car pulling into one of the parking spaces reserved for those with disabilities. After a few minutes you see the driver's side car door open. The driver seems to be struggling a bit to get out of the car. The first thing that comes out of the car is a pair of crutches. The next thing that appears is his leg, which is artificial. While it takes an almost excruciatingly long period of time, the man makes his way out of the car. It appears he has done this before. He then begins making his way toward the line where people are waiting to vote. He's wearing a baseball cap that identifies him as a World War II veteran -- there aren't many of those still around anymore. He's also wearing a T-shirt for the candidate he is supporting . . . and it's *not* the T-shirt you are wearing. He continues to slowly make his way toward the line, but more specifically he is heading in your direction, and that makes you a little uncomfortable. When he gets within a few feet of you, he seems to be searching -- looking up and down the very long line. He then looks at you and asks the obvious question, "Are you in line to vote?" You answer, "Yes, this is the line. It's pretty long isn't it?" The man doesn't respond, he just looks bewildered.

So, what are you going to do? Are you going to point him to the end of the line telling him that he should have gotten there earlier to vote? Are you going to remember that words we just read in Matthew's gospel, but maybe you reframe them with the words we are most used to in life -- the first will be *first* and the last will be *last*? Besides, he's voting for the other person -- not your guy or gal. Or, will you try to find a way to help him get into vote, even if it means he may get in

ahead of you? Who knows, the polls may close before you get up there. It could cost you. It may even cost the election. What are you going to do?

Now if you are saying that this is too hard of an example and things like this don't really happen in life, I would say that things like this happen in life all the time -- *if* we are paying attention. This is often what it means to figure out how to live our lives and follow Christ. You see, if we view this parable through one context -- that believes God is primarily interested in me first and life being fair for me, then it can affect our choices. But, if we view this parable through another context -- for example, the perspective of the land owner who is not only rich, but who also seems to care primarily about helping others find work to support their families -- then that context can also affect the choices we make in life . . . *if* we allow it to. But God really does leave it up to us. We have a choice and our choices matter not only in our lives, but in the lives of others.

We have talked about to whom we relate in this parable -- the workers who toiled the whole day and feel that the landowner is not being fair with them, or the landowner who seems to have a passion to help people make a living and support themselves and their families. But maybe we might relate to the workers who were still standing at 5:00 in the afternoon looking for work. They are also invited to work for what turns out to be just a brief amount of time, but amazingly they *still* get a day's wage to feed themselves and their families. It is another picture of God's amazing grace -- a grace in which we do not get what we deserve, we get *more* than we deserve. We get grace!

Traditionally this passage has been interpreted to represent the Jews and the Gentiles -- with the Jews being those who came first, and the Gentiles being the ones who are added at the end who come last. But God's grace and love and forgiveness are for all. God doesn't seem that concerned with making sure we only get the amount of grace we deserve -- which is not really grace at all. And unless we have Jewish roots, then we are Gentiles, the ones who come last -- the "five o'clockers" who are still invited into God's Kingdom.

Suppose you were one of the workers in the parable who got there early that day and you were given work so you could feed your family. But, your sister's husband was also looking for work, so you get word to him to show up at the market because the landowner is hiring and he can get work to feed your sister and her children. Your brother-in-law shows up as soon as he can and he gets work. So, when everyone gets paid at the end of the day, do you get mad and envious because your brother-in-law got the same amount of money as you did to feed your sister and her kids? Or, are you just grateful that the landowner was just as generous to your brother-in-law as he was to you? Friends, maybe when we all feel that way, the way of generosity, the Kingdom of God will come, and God's will will be done here on earth as it is in heaven!

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