

Throughout human history, across cultures and in countless languages, people have pondered a central question: “What happens after we die?” The world’s religions, wisdom traditions and philosophers have expounded on the subject for centuries. Western Christians have tended to say: “We go to heaven,” although many of us also assume an alternative destination to be avoided if we can arrange it.

It’s worth pondering the question of what may happen after we die. But the question is big enough to distract us. Like when we hear Paul saying, “To me, living is Christ and dying is gain” and that his “desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” Now, we can surely agree that being with Christ beyond death is preferable to some other potential situations.

But there’s a risk in that point of view if it leads us to lose interest in *this* life; to clutch onto a vision of a time and place beyond this vale of tears. The risk is in putting all our hopes into an all-too human vision of heaven as only some place we go after we die.

Paul is talking about something else. And so is Matthew’s Jesus when he overwhelms our minds with a vision of gratuitous abundance.

In his earliest letters, Paul appears to anticipate being alive when God brings heaven to earth, but in this set of letters to the church at Philippi, he realizes the improbability that he will still be drawing breath. Even writing from prison, these letters are among his most joyful and uplifting.

Paul seems to be aware that his current imprisonment may well end in his death. He also appears confident that the seeds he planted in Philippi would blossom into new life whether he “remained in the flesh” and continued his teaching or died a martyr and shared in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Now liberated from the attachment to life or death, Paul can honestly write: “I do not know which I prefer.” Paul realizes his unity with Christ, and he is clear that every breathe he is granted and every last ounce of energy in his mortal body can be given in service to Christ, regardless of the consequences.

Paul’s non-attached awareness allows him to encourage the colony at Philippi to live their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. His letter uses a Greek word – a verb – that usually refers to the proper and patriotic behavior of a good citizen.

So, in this context, Paul is implying that their citizenship is the realm of heaven and their guiding charter is the Gospel. And he encourages all followers of Christ to behave like the citizens of God's heaven that they are. Paul's awareness of his unity with Christ gives him all the confidence he needs to be present with humanity; with people struggling with injustice and evil.

The parable that Matthew's Jesus tells provides an opening to that *same* awareness; a way to begin seeing beyond our limited self-centered perspective in a peek at humanity from God's point of view. And it begins with a story about property-owners and day laborers.

Jesus compares God to a land owner looking for people to work in his creation. It's not hard to imagine a truck pulling up to Home Depot to pick up a few folks to help with a little house painting or some yard work. So far, so good, but then the story slowly becomes unrealistically strange, and it starts to make union leaders twitch.

The story takes an unexpected turn when the landowner goes back to get more laborers at nine, again at noon and once more at three. He tells them he will give them what is *just*. The landowner notices that the day laborers have been standing idle.

People listening to Jesus wonder what he's getting at as the landowner heads out one last time right before the workday ends. The landowner asks again why the laborers have been standing idle all day. He seems more concerned about why they aren't working than he is about the grape harvest.

Now, Jesus never once suggests that these unproductive people are lazy, indifferent or unable to work. They are idle because no one has hired them, and the landowner quickly remedies that situation. "You also go into the vineyard," he says, making no mention of payment.

The folks hired on early in the morning have a relatively detailed understanding of the contract they've agreed to. Those hired throughout the day have a promise of justice. The folks hired just before the end of the work day have no clue what they will get for their efforts.

What happens next comes as a complete surprise to everyone. When evening came, (and the Greek here is specific) *the Lord* 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."

That's outrageous! Attorneys, union organizers, business consultants – all of them perk up about now. When the folks hired last show up, they get

exactly the same as the folks who have been working in the scorching heat from dawn until dusk: a full day's pay. Something immediately strikes us as wrong. Giving the last folks hired a *percentage* of the usual daily wage going rate seems fair.

Where is the justice in paying out the full amount?

The folks who have been working all day want to know the same thing. Except they have been paid exactly what they agreed to. They have not been treated unjustly or unfairly. They are upset because the landowner made them all equal. The root of their unhappiness is in their attachment to a point of view.

They are envious precisely because the landowner has been generous.

Jesus wraps up this parable with an enigma: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Now, enigmas like this one can derail our habitual perspectives. "First" and "last" are comparative notions, not spiritual realities. This enigma interrupts our outlook on fairness and justice.

Unfairness and *injustice* surround us. We experience them in our own lives. We see it in the lives of our friends and families. Unfairness and injustice are almost defining characteristics of some lives.

So, we run the risk of assuming that there is nothing else. And there is an inherent instability when we live inside an unchallenged perspective based on comparisons. If we measure what happens to us from the point of view of our own comparative well-being, we *praise* whatever promotes or protects our well-being. And we *condemn* whatever diminishes or endangers us.

By adopting a limited human vision of God's reality, we wait for justice and fairness to come someday, just like we wait for heaven. Someday.

Jesus is cracking open that worldview to give us a glimpse of another way. The light pouring through that crack is there to inspire followers of Christ to behave *right now* like the citizens of God's heaven that they are.

Because, for both Paul and Jesus, entering the realm of heaven does not mean going somewhere else after death. To enter heaven is to belong *in the present* to the people who guide their behavior by the standards and purposes of God's inbreaking heaven. We don't go to heaven when we die. Heaven comes *here* even as we live.

So, you see, there is something beyond what we get for ourselves. We get *work* in God's vineyard. Focusing exclusively on who gets what distracts us into standing around and waiting. We lose sight of the larger reality

permeating every aspect of our lives. We tune out the holy reality that embraces our human reality, even as it goes beyond.

We wait for heaven to come later. We wait for someone else at some other time to act with justice and fairness. The Lord of vineyard doesn't see life that way. The Holy One visits often and offers work to everyone; gives every one of us work to do in bringing a taste of heaven, a measure of justice and an ounce of fairness to God's creation, just as it is right now.

Whoever we are, whether it is early or late in the harvest, whether we understand any part of the arrangement or none at all, we get hired on to work.

Once in the vineyard, we are alive in the realm of heaven, though not yet as fully as we will be in the resurrection. There is still harvest work to do and the work itself is the reward. The joy is in the contribution, the ecstasy is in joining with God in the creation of the world.

Once in the vineyard, we enter a state of awareness of the abundant realm of heaven. We do our work in the limited human world that is aware mostly of the scarcity realm of self-interest. But God's work crew doesn't need to worry. We no longer need to look out only for our personal best interests.

No, we are liberated from the attachment to comparative gain or loss, and even to life or death. Like Paul, our awareness opens to our unity with Christ, and we become clear that every breathe we are granted and every last ounce of energy in our mortal body we can freely give in service to Christ, regardless of the consequences.

The Holy One, in whose vineyard we work, knows what we need and is delighted to give it all and *much more*. The Lord of the vineyard chooses to give us *eternity*. To give us, from God's point of view, one day's wages in the realm of heaven.

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