

Lesson Plans That Work
Year A – Season after Pentecost, Proper 20
Gospel Lesson for Older Children

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

In this season after Pentecost, we hear stories of Jesus' ministry in the world and our call to engage in that mission. This season is also known as Ordinary Time coming from the word "ordinal" which means counted time. This time is not ordinary as in common or regular, but it is the time of counted weeks between Pentecost and Advent. The color for this season is green and it is often referred to as the green growing time as we hear stories of what God is calling us to do in the world, we join in that call, and we grow in our faith.

A Notation for This Week's Gospel

This parable appears in the section of Matthew where those around Jesus are questioning him about everything. As Jesus continues his ministry and the disciples are witnessing his great works, they keep coming to him with questions about taxes, who is the greatest in Heaven, forgiveness, divorce, and how to inherit eternal life. The disciples are trying to figure out this new world that they are experiencing through Jesus' miracles, parables, and teachings. Just prior to our lesson today, the disciples have heard Jesus tell the rich young man that he must sell everything and give the money to the poor. They begin to wonder, "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Meaning, we have left our homes and our families, we have left behind what we know and love to follow you...what will we get in return?

So, Jesus tells them the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. This is a difficult parable as there are many ways it can be read. It could be seen as unfair or pitting justice with grace. However we read it, this parable is about God's generosity and God's grace.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel has sandwiched the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard with 19:30 (³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.) and 20:16 ("So the last will be first, and the first will be last.") Clearly this is an important message for Matthew to get across. That there is a reversal of the way we assume things will be and we are playing by a new rulebook.

A good number of the children will have heard "The first will be last and the last will be first." We don't want them to think this is just about letting the last person in line go first or that they should always be last to receive a reward, but that this is about how much God loves them that it does not matter where they are in line or where they are finding God, but more that they are all a part of this together and we will all receive God's amazing love and grace.

Theme: We Are All a Part of God's Work

Before: You will need Bibles or copies of the reading for each child and rewards for the children.

Beginning: As the children arrive, welcome them to the room and invite them to your gathering area. Ask them how their week was. If you want to give them a primer for your lesson, you can ask if they got to go first or last at anything this week.

Opening Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for your words that teach us about your love and the amazing gifts that you give us. Be with us as we learn more about you, that we might come to know you in a new way. Amen.

The Story: Matthew 20:1-16

In the Bible we hear stories of many people. These people are just like us, they eat and sleep, go to school and work. God has a plan for each of them, and in hearing the stories we learn that God's plan is for each of us too.

Invite the children to Matthew 20:1-16. Ask each child to read a verse, or simply say "pass" when it comes to be their turn if they do not want to read.

Reflection Questions:

- I wonder what you most liked about the story?
- I wonder what questions it made you think of as you listened?
- I wonder what it was like to be the first laborers that were hired?
- I wonder what it was like to be the laborers that were hired at the end of the day and only had to do a few hours of work?
- I wonder what it felt like for them to all receive the same amount of pay for their work?
- I wonder what it was like to be the landowner who was generous and giving to all his workers?
- I wonder who the landowner could be?

First Shall Be Last Games

These are games to get the children thinking about what it is like to be first or last. You can add different categories to these exercises as well.

I want you all to line up in order of your birthdays. January first, December last

Nice job everyone! We have the first in line, _____ and the last in line, _____.

Next, without talking, I want you to line up in order of tallest to shortest, but this time, you can't talk. Tallest first to shortest last.

Nice job! Was that easier or harder than the last time? We have ____ who is first because he/she is tallest and _____ who is last because he/she is shortest.

Next task, I need a volunteer. (*Choose one volunteer and whisper the instructions to them. His or her job is to line everyone up by his or her hair color. The children don't know how they are being chosen, only that they have to stay in the place that your volunteer puts them. Have the volunteer line them up Red heads first, blonde in the middle, brown and black are last. Once they are done, ask the children.*)

What order do you think _____ put you into? How did he/she choose the order?

Reflect on the games. What did it feel like to be first? What did it feel like to be last? What did it feel like to be in the middle?

Circle of Grace

Okay, we are going to play a different game this time. I get to pick the order and I will give you instructions as we go.

If you want to make it more challenging, you can also do things like having one person only use one arm, or another stand on one leg, or another will be blindfolded, etc.

Ask the children to sit quietly as you choose them to help you with your invisible table. As you choose them, ask them to stand with their arms bent at the elbow and palms up. Tell them that they are holding up a really important, new invisible table, and they need to stay right where you put them, in order for the table to be properly supported.

As you choose the children, place them side by side, but as you are placing them, make sure that they will be in a circle in the end. If you realize during the game that you need to move some children do make more or less room, you can do so, just tell them that you are making some minor adjustments as new workers come to help with the task. Depending on how small or large of a group you have, you can choose the children one at a time, or a few at a time.

The following is a script of what you can say to the children as you choose them. Feel free to improvise.

I have an invisible table over here and one of the legs just was glued, so I need your help holding this table up as the leg dries. As I come around a choose people please remember this important task.

I'm going to choose you first. Do you like being first?

Your task is to stand here. Bend your elbows so your hands are out in front of you, palms up. Now, you are holding up our brand new invisible table and I need you to stay right there and hold on to it while I make sure that the leg on the table is secure and glued well. Because you are helping me with this work, I will make sure that you get a wonderful reward.

Let that child stand there for a moment while you walk around the invisible table, sizing it up, testing the leg, etc.

Looks like I will need a few other people to help this person to make sure that the table is steady.

Choose a few other children, giving them the same instructions as the first.

So, you are the second group. I know that you haven't been working as long as the first, but I need to you help us out. Your task is to stand here. Bend your elbows so your hands are out in front of you, palms up. Now, you are holding up our brand new invisible table and I need you to stay right there and hold on to keep it steady and let the glue dry.

You too will get a reward for your work. What do you like about being second? If you can't be first, is being second okay with you?

Keep adding children, either one at a time or a few at a time and reflecting with them about their place. You can put them right next to each other, or add them "around the table." Make sure and tell them that they will get a reward as well, even though they haven't been working/helping as long as the others. You may want to ask those that you brought into the circle first or second how they are doing every once in a while.

In the end, once all the children are a part of the circle, walk around the outside of the circle, maybe readjusting some of the children, or raising or lowering their hands a bit.

Now that they are all standing next to each other with their hands out and level with one another, you can tell them that the invisible table that they are holding is now sturdy and they can put it gently on the ground and sit down around the table.

Thank you for all the work that you did today! It was really important that we all did this together so that they glue dried evenly. You can gently put the table down. Now that the table is secure, let's all have a seat so that I can give you your reward.

Give the children a reward. This does not have to be significant, it's more about them all getting the same thing. It could be a fruit roll, granola bar, small bag of goldfish crackers, sticker, lollipop, etc. Once they all have gotten the same thing, wonder with the children with questions like:

- I wonder what this was like for those who I chose first?
- For those I chose last?
- I wonder what it was like for those who were chosen in the middle?
- Did you all think that you would get different rewards?

This reminds me of our lesson today and the workers in the vineyard. Even though we joined in doing the work at different times, and some were standing and holding our amazing invisible table longer than others, we are all a part of the work. It does not matter when we joined in, but more that we are all a part of the work. God loves us all, not matter when we come. God gives us all the same, amazing, unconditional love and grace.

Closure: Invite the children to share stories they can think of when they all pitched in to get the work done. Invite them to share about their favorite part of today's lesson.

Gather/Ending: Gracious love, we thank you for your unconditional love and grace that you show us each day. As we leave this place, help us to remember that we are all a part of your kingdom and we are all called to do your work in the world around us. Amen.

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.' 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? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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