



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • [www.bspsc.org](http://www.bspsc.org)

### “Latecomers”

Matthew 20:1-16

October 15, 2017

Reverend Amy Miracle  
Broad Street Presbyterian Church  
Columbus, OH

There are two kinds of people. Those who arrive late and those who arrive on time. I am in the latter group. It is always my goal to be on time, if not early. Let’s be honest, those who arrive on time resent latecomers. We resent those who come late to the movies or to class or to a ballgame, making the whole row stand as they squeeze past carrying hotdogs and drinks. We resent the last person to board the plane, the person who makes a left turn long after the light has changed to red.

We resent latecomers in our society. This country has always struggled to welcome the most recent wave of immigrants, whether it was those from Ireland in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century or those from Italy in the early 20<sup>th</sup>. We struggle to accept the latest arrivals.

Which brings me to a man named Fred Korematsu. Do you know that name? We should all know that name. Korematsu was a Japanese American and an Elder in the First Presbyterian Church of Oakland, California. His parents legally immigrated to the United States and Fred was born here, making him a U.S. citizen. Before Pearl Harbor, he tried to enlist in the U.S. Army but was rejected. On February 19, 1942, a Presidential Executive Order declared Fred Korematsu—and all Japanese citizens—a threat to national security. They were ordered to report to internment camps. Fred refused to comply. He did not go to the camp with the rest of his family. He was eventually arrested and convicted of violating a military order. He was given five years’ probation and sent to an internment camp for the rest of the war. Immediately after his arrest, while still in jail, he was visited by an attorney from the ACLU who asked Fred if he would like to challenge his arrest. Fred, then 25 years old, decided to do so. He fought the Executive Order all the way to the Supreme Court. He insisted that being of Japanese heritage was not a justified reason to place him in a prison camp.<sup>1</sup>

In 1944, in *Korematsu vs. the United States*, the Supreme Court ruled against him, stating “incarceration was justified due to military necessity.” Korematsu’s conviction was overturned in 1983. The Supreme Court decision, however, still stands.

We fear the latecomer.

In this parable of the workers in the vineyard, Jesus plays off our fear. The parable is set in two locations: in a vineyard and a marketplace where many people have gathered in search of work. The vineyard owner goes out to the marketplace early in the morning to hire laborers. They agree on the price to be paid and the owner sends them out into the field. He goes to the marketplace again about nine o’clock, finds many idle workers and he promises to pay them whatever is right. And the owner does that again at noon and 3:00 p.m. and then 5:00 p.m. At 5:00, seeing inactive workers he asks, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They answer, “Because no

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<sup>1</sup>To learn more about Fred Korematsu: <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/30/512488821/its-fred-korematsu-day-celebrating-a-foe-of-u-s-internment-camps>  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/radiolab-presents-more-perfect-american-pendulum-i/>

one has hired us.” You hear in their response the tragedy of men and women who can find no work. But it is not too late for them and the landowner sends this group out into the field as well.

This may be an odd way of staffing a business but there is nothing too unusual until it comes time to pay the workers. The landowner makes two big mistakes in his method of compensation. To start with, he pays the last first. If he pays those who work all day first, they go home in peace, never suspecting that they are being paid the same amount as those who work much less. The landowner’s second mistake is that he doesn’t use envelopes.<sup>2</sup>

Oh, how I resonate with the resentment of the workers who labor all day. It’s not fair. Those who work all day should be compensated more than those who only work an hour. Those who are late should not receive the same as those who are early. It’s not fair. I don’t like it when things aren’t fair.

And this is certainly no way to run a successful vineyard. It wouldn’t take long for all of the workers to show up at 5:00 and expect to be paid a day’s wage for an hour’s work. But, of course, this parable isn’t about how to run a successful vineyard. The stakes are higher. This is a story about how God operates, a story of what is important to God.

According to this parable, from the perspective of God, we are not in competition with each other. According to God’s rules, the person who has been a seeker of God for their entire life is no more valued by God than the person who engages in life of faith later in life. There is no distinction made between old-timer and newcomer.

If anything, latecomers are singled out for special attention. Jesus ends his parable with the words: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” The Gospels contain several stories about the value of latecomers. The Good Samaritan must have been late for his next appointment. The Wise Men arrive late to the manger, but they come bearing gifts for the baby Jesus. Perhaps if we are open to them, latecomers bring us gifts as well.

That is certainly true of the church. As I think over the people who have become a part of our church community in recent years, I see folks who have many gifts to share with those of us who have been laboring for a while in this particular vineyard. Latecomers bring gifts of energy and vision and freshness that we desperately need.

This parable reminds us of the value of latecomers. Of course, there wouldn’t be any latecomers if it wasn’t for the landowner and his odd behavior. He is bound and determined to gather up as many workers as he can.<sup>3</sup> I hope he has a hybrid. Because he uses up a lot of gas going back and forth from the market to the vineyard, the vineyard to the market. All of this travel; all of this energy. And for what? To gather up anyone who would consent to work for “whatever is right.” The owner of the vineyard just can’t stop inviting, calling, hiring, seeking, using everyone’s talent and schedule.

This is not the image of God that I grew up with. Isn’t God supposed to be stationary, immobile, unchanging, calm—not frenetic—not frenzied, not on the move? God should just stay still and wait for people to come to God. All this back and forth, to and fro—it doesn’t seem very dignified. All this work—all this effort. Why?

Because God wants us. God wants every last one of us. Not at some distant time in the future but today. God is the owner of the vineyard, driving to the market seeking us. All of this energy, all of this back and forth is for us. That us includes those who aren’t presently with us, those who aren’t in this room, those who have yet to

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<sup>2</sup> I owe this insight to the late Ernie Campbell. I heard him preach on this passage many years ago.

<sup>3</sup> William Willimon, “The Invitation,” *30 Good Minutes*, <http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/490-william-willimon-program-3603>

join us. The best thing and the most frustrating thing about being the church—the work of welcoming and inviting is never over. There are always new latecomers.

Back to Fred Korematsu. The road he traveled was often very lonely. The country that he loved imprisoned him. During the time of his court case, he received virtually no support from his family or the Japanese American community. They feared that such actions would create more trouble for them. For decades, he kept quiet about his story. He didn't share his history with his children; his daughter learned about the court case in high school history class.

That started to change as Fred realized that there is always a new group of latecomers, who are often resented or feared. He spoke out against racial profiling. This, too, was often lonely work. His daughter remembers something that happened in the 1990s. Her parents were walking across a university campus when a group of Arab American students surrounded them. They had a certificate to present to her father thanking him for speaking out on their behalf. To them, he was a hero, a role model. She remembers how much that meant to her father.<sup>4</sup> He continued this work until his death in 2005 at the age of 89. I wonder if this lifelong church-goer connected this parable to his life and his work.

Because this parable has something to say to those of us who arrive late. And it has something to say to those of us who resent those who come late.

A few weeks ago, I was catching a flight out of Columbus on a Sunday afternoon. I am not at my best on Sunday afternoons. I got to the airport in plenty of time but chose the wrong line for screening. A trainee was behind the screen and the line moved very slowly. Eventually, I got through security and still had time to make my flight. Not any extra time but enough time. I started heading towards my gate when I realized that I was at the wrong terminal. Now in most airports that wouldn't be that big of a deal but at our airport that meant exiting security and going through another screening process. I ran to the security line for Gate C, saw the long line and realized that I was most likely going to miss my flight.

I said in a loud voice, "Excuse me. I foolishly went through security at the wrong gate and now I'm running late for my flight. Would you all be OK if I went ahead of you?" The people in line—who had clearly been waiting for a while—said, "Absolutely. Go right ahead. Good luck making your flight." In a matter of seconds, I was at the front of the line.

And I made that flight. I was the last person to board. A few people glared at me as I walked back and forth in the aisle, trying to find a space for my carry-on. I made the flight because grace had been extended to me—me who takes great pride in being on time, who tends to resent latecomers. Those strangers offered to me a grace and understanding that I'm not sure I would have granted to them if our roles were reversed. They acted with such grace and it felt... it felt... good.

It's OK to be late. Because stuff happens. We go to the wrong gate. We encounter unexpected traffic. The road is closed. Life gets hard. We are overwhelmed. It's O.K to be late. It's OK to be a slow learner. It's OK to take a while to figure things out. It's OK to get your priorities straight late in life. It's OK to be late. God loves those who are late. Values them. Cherishes them.

Today we give thanks for a God who constantly, persistently, relentlessly pursues us and everyone else. Because all of us are welcome. Everyone last one of us.

That's grace. Amazing grace.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.radiolab.org/story/radiolab-presents-more-perfect-american-pendulum-i/>