

Sermon: Last Will be First and First Will be Last

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, September 20, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Equality is, in my view, a bit overrated. It's a nice concept to have, an aspirational one that conveniently ignores a fundamental shortcoming of the human society—that is no one is truly equal. We each comes from a different starting point, a different path to get to where we are, and we are each constrained by our own shortcomings, no matter how much we wish to be equal to others.

Take for example this picture, of three individuals behind a tall fence, each standing on a platform of the same height, wanting to watch a baseball game beyond the fence. But the three individuals have different heights. The tallest fellow have no problem seeing the baseball field, the middle fellow barely has his head above the fence, and the shortest one is completely out of luck. Although they have each been given a platform of equal height, as one could conceivably characterize the situation as the three having 'equal opportunity', but is this truly just?

Justice on the other hand, would mean the tallest one not given a platform at all, for he does not need one to see over the fence. The middle fellow stays the same, standing on a platform, but the shortest one is now given two platforms to stand on, resulting that all three are able to see the ball game, unobstructed. In a sense what they have each been given may not be equal, but the result of all being able to watch the ballgame unobstructed is just.

It is with that in mind we turn to the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, as recorded in Matthew 20:1-16, our New Testament reading today. This parable of Jesus is somewhat baffling, as often is the case. A landowner of a vineyard went out early in the morning to hire labourers to work his field. The wage he is willing to pay is denarius a day—a fair wage for a day labourer. However, later in the day, he saw others standing around in the market place, with nothing to do. So he hired them as well, and sent them to work the vineyard. He did so at the third hour, at the sixth hour, at the ninth hour, and at the eleventh hour, each time hiring additional labourers for the same wage—a denarius a day.

When the workday was over, and the owner instructed his steward to pay the workers, those who came last were first given their promised wage—a denarius for the day. At that moment, those who were hired first complained, rightly might I add, “*These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the [entire] day*” (v.12) Now if one could put oneself in their shoes, if one happen to find oneself being paid the same amount as one’s colleagues who only work 1/10 as hard or as long, I suspect anyone would’ve complained—this is patently unjust, unfair!!!

To such justified complaint made by those who had worked the entire day, the response by the landowner is rather curt, akin to: I am paying you what was initially agreed upon, so you should just shut up and buzz off. To this story, Jesus then added his customary concluding one-liner: “*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*” (v.16) QED, quod erat demonstrandum, or ‘thus it has been shown’.

Keeping in mind this parable of Jesus was told to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, as the opening verse of the parable makes clear. In that sense, the landowner represents God, and his rational all the sudden makes sense. Shouldn’t the landowner be free to show generosity to whomever he wants? Shouldn’t God be free to do the same? For God says to Moses, “*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion*” We see this in its original context of Exodus 33:19; and we see it again as Paul reminds his audience of it in Romans 9:15.

It is this last part, “*So the last will be first, and the first will be last*” that we ought to take notice and perhaps rejoice, for it is turning the existing world order completely upside down. It is equalizing the playing field, it is righting the historical wrongs, it is more than equality, it is more than justice, it is tearing down fences that separate people from one another.

The earlier pictures shown about the ballpark, did anyone wonder why there were fences obstructing view to the ball game in the first place? Who put it there? For what was its purpose? Who benefits from those fences? Who loses out? What would happen if those fences were to be removed?

In the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus Christ is on the march. He is tearing down fences, he is re-writing the old-world-order. The ‘economy of grace’ that Jesus is offering, is not based on how many hours we have laboured, it is not based on the work we’ve put in, it is entirely based on our

willingness to accept that we are loved by God, which in turn calls us to return that love with all our hearts, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Love thus becomes our currency in such an economy, and sharing becomes the tool.

Just like the mechanism of 'equalization', a Canadian federal transfer program designed to reduce provincial fiscal disparities, in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, there is a mechanism by which we share with one another on a denominational level. I am speaking of the Presbyterians Sharing. It is a mechanism by which the national church recommends each congregation to offer up to 10% of their annual budget, consistent with the principle of tithing, so that these gifts given by God can be used to carry out Christ's ministry collectively in our communities and around the world.

Together, through Presbyterians Sharing, we build strong congregations, serve vulnerable people, walk with Indigenous people, seek justice and share God's love around the world.

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you this short video on what Presbyterians Sharing is all about:

< video: 2026 Presbyterians Sharing >