

No seniority (25A; Matthew 20:1-16)

As a culture, we don't have much patience for the last.

by [Kentina Washington-Leapheart](#)

September 18, 2020

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Middle school is often the cruelest school.

I remember that all-important moment during gym class when my peers would line up for a game of five-on-five basketball. The gym teacher would select the two team captains, and those captains would pick their teammates.

Their deliberation process was usually anything but fair and impartial. They would choose the “real” ballers first, then the most popular kids, then the tallest ones. Still unclaimed? The last picks? The undesirable, talentless, and invisible.

Even once the picks were made, the team captains and the first picks would never let you forget your place. No matter how much you tried to get in the game, somehow the ball never seemed to meet your eager hands, but the insulting glares from your so-called teammates landed on you just fine.

These players weren't selected; they were endured.

This kind of conscription process is not just an adolescent phenomenon. As a culture, we don't have much patience for the last picks either. Late? No worms for you. On the bottom rung? Hold still while we climb over you. Last hired? First fired.

Our society is one whose very structure is rooted in systems that are designed to stratify individuals due to class, ability, race, gender, and all manner of other identities. The grumbling laborers in Jesus' parable offer the familiar refrain of those born into and thriving within privilege: *if you work hard and pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you too can be successful*. Unfortunately, very little is ever said about the fact that not everyone's bootstraps are the same length, quality, or level of durability—if you even have bootstraps at all.

We've been trained to believe that seniority is superiority. That legacy is currency. But legacy and seniority don't tell the full story.

This parable is just one example of many in which Jesus uses the power of story to upend the status quo. It's one that on first reading can feel a bit clunky to understand and apply in our daily lives. Legacy and seniority don't matter when you have to take two buses and a train to get to the vineyard. Legacy and seniority don't matter when your citizenship status precludes you from applying for employment for fear of deportation. Legacy and seniority don't matter when, in the age of COVID-19, going to work everyday can mean, for the most vulnerable people in our society, the difference between life or death.

Perhaps if we took the time to humanize the laborers—to think of them not just as nameless, faceless people standing in a long line but as flesh-and-blood human beings in our own communities who are picked over daily in their pursuit of life and liberty—this parable would hit home more deeply. The last being first and the first being last is more than just a lofty ideal. It is the very unusual and uncomfortable concept that is often the catalyst for equity.