



LIVING the Parable

BY TOM ELLSWORTH

Jesus' parable of the vineyard laborers who all received the same wage (despite the fact that some started at the 11th hour) has created more questions than answers for me. It just didn't seem . . . fair.

When I talked with Kenny Ooley regarding his relationship with the Lord, he shared his struggle. He didn't struggle with his faith; he struggled with his past. **How could a perfect God love and forgive him for a lifetime of lousy choices?** Could God be that generous? Could forgiveness extend that far? After all, he had wasted a lifetime without the Savior.

With his 62nd birthday just days away, he was convinced his best years were behind him. He expressed shame about being a Johnny-come-lately to the kingdom. "It isn't fair to sneak in at the 11th hour and give God the leftovers," he said. He was afraid if I baptized him he would somehow mess that up, too.

I reminded him that our goodness (or badness, for that matter) was not the determining factor. The Savior is good enough and generously invites us to serve in his vineyard regardless of the hour.

A few days later, with a handful of close friends joining him, he and I stood in the baptistry. He confessed Jesus

as his Lord, and I lowered him into the water. When he emerged, the weathered lines of his face gave way to a joy and peace like he had never known before.

The following morning Kenny entered the hospital for what was to be a serious but routine surgery. The result, however, was anything but routine, and by week's end Kenny had died. We buried him on his 62nd birthday.

This parable of the vineyard laborers was read at Kenny's funeral. Never had it seemed more relevant. I was no longer wrestling with its apparent inequities; I was just celebrating God's generosity. I thought I had helped Kenny spiritually, but instead he helped me understand the God of the harvest better. I shouldn't be surprised at how God works—but I always am. I will be forever grateful that God's generosity is distributed on his terms, not mine.

Gratefully, we will share Heaven with Kenny Ooley and every other 11th-hour worker in God's vineyard. Even the parable's punchline made sense; among those who had prayed for his salvation, Kenny was last to acknowledge the Savior but first to see his face!

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My Heart's Full Desire

BY PHYLLIS FOX

"It's like the Rascal Flatts song, 'Life Is a Highway,'" said Daniel. The "highway" led Daniel Ball from Chatham, England, to Milligan College in Tennessee to play soccer (and for an education). "I had never heard of Milligan College until I received a call from Adam Laney, Milligan's men's soccer coach. After arriving at the airport in Tennessee, my first impression was there literally is a church on every corner. I knew East Tennessee was in the South and that the area is called the Bible Belt, but I didn't know I would be living on the buckle," Daniel said.

Shortly after moving to Milligan, Daniel called home and told his mom he didn't understand why the coach was praying before and after every game. "I just didn't understand why we would pray for the other team to have a safe journey home when we had just beaten them," he said. "Then there was the Old Testament class. When Dr. Jeff Miller began talking about the canon, I thought to myself, *what is he talking about? A cannon is something you shoot large explosives from.* Needless to say, I received my worst grades at Milligan in the Old and New Testament classes. Hey, did you know there's a story of Daniel in a lion's den in the Bible?"

Things changed during Daniel's time at Milligan. Before he arrived, he had never been to church, except to attend a wedding. No one in Daniel's family is a Christian. The whole concept of God and church was foreign to him. But all full-time students are expected to participate in Milligan's spiritual formation program that helps nurture the Christian spirit, character, and worldview. Opportunities for spiritual development include chapel and convocation services, mission trips, community service, and many other events.

One Sunday morning, a teammate sent Daniel a text inviting him to go to church. "I thought, *he's gone out of his way to include me*, so I went." He described one church as "having great worship music, but the pastor's message was over my head." Then another friend invited him to go to Love Chapel Christian Church in Erwin. "The music wasn't exciting, but Pastor Robert's (Robert Bess, senior minister) message was inspiring. Two weeks later they opened a café service and it was great.

Daniel began going to church and listening to Robert's messages. "Things he said gripped my heart, but I still had questions," said Daniel. "One day, I called up Lisa Buckley, the women's soccer coach at Milligan. She's like my mom away from home, and we went for a drive. In the conversation I told Lisa that I wasn't sure what it means to be a Christian. I asked her for some benchmarks to measure myself."

Lisa explained to Daniel that it wasn't a complicated process and she told him the simple steps to accept Christ.

A few months ago, Daniel shared his testimony of becoming a Christian in a spiritual formation event on campus. He said, "I want Christ to be my full heart's desire."

Daniel has kept a journal since coming to the United States. "While my book doesn't have a back cover, it does have a spine. Just like the human body, where everything comes off of the spine, so it is with me. The spine of my life is faith. It has been for a long time, I just didn't realize it."

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