

Matthew 20:1-16

^{20:1} “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius (which is the customary daily wage) for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

⁷ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

⁸ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

⁹ “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.

¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

¹³ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The parable we read today gives us a stunning view of the great paradox of grace: that our human ideas of “deserving” do not line up with divine compassion that is offered to all – because we know that all of us are undeserving.

Jesus illuminates this truth by telling a story that’s just as confrontational today as it was in his day. You can understand the setting. If you’re up early enough in Durham, you know the scene Jesus pictures for us. Before the sun rises, groups gather by Lowe’s and Home Depot, they line up and wait for the doors of the staffing agencies to open. The day laborers wait for a builder or a farmer or a business to come by and make an offer for a day’s work.

Jesus tells us how the owner of the vineyard goes to where the day laborers gather to invite them to work.

The invitation to work means so much more to those who have to wait for their labor. For the day laborer, the invitation to work offers the possibility of feeding the family. The chance to labor in the field is the only alternative to the nakedness or want of going without.

More than that, the call to work is also an invitation to *worth*.

I was reminded of this in a memorable set of conversations with a friend. A very well-accomplished colleague who was a pastor of a prominent church. He was unceremoniously fired late in the afternoon one Friday by phone by the deacon and personnel chairpersons. They told him that he could clean out his office and not come back. "It was better for him and the church if they just parted ways," they said.

He felt truly blindsided by that. The experience sent him crashing to ground in way he almost didn't survive. His sense of worth was so wrapped up in his work as a pastor that when it was just taken away, he didn't know who he was anymore.

Of course, much more than that, we talked about was how to understand your dignity and worth apart from the authority or prominence or prestige or even the compensation attached to work. We depend on our work – or maybe we depend on the rewards to our egos or our bank accounts – in ways that can grow toxic. Ministers are not exempt from that temptation.

Any work that's not guided by a moral compass will take us to places where we sacrifice others and ourselves on the altar of unending self-service, acquisition, consumption. Will Rogers put an even finer point on it: "What the country needs," he said, "is dirtier fingernails and cleaner minds."

My friend and I re-discovered that as we talked it through.

In the parable today Jesus offers an invitation to be willing to do work with others and share the rewards.

The drama of the parable comes when the laborers – some of whom have worked all day while others have worked a short while – come to get paid. It is in that moment that Jesus exposes destructive attitudes of jealousy, position and keeping score.

As we read today: "So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them received also a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.'" (vs. 10-14).

The parable sounds like something that we could accept, it's a noble thought...until you remember that time when someone you didn't know was elected to the diaconate instead of you, or a new face at church was honored instead someone who was of a part of the long-standing, old guard.

If we have a problem with this parable, it's because of the implications for us. There doesn't seem to be any correlation between our work, our time served, our neighbor's work – and the reward – whatever that reward may be.

We don't always celebrate when we remember that we are not The Giver – God is.

We do well to check our mindset from time to time. As yourself: "Whose Church is this?" Listen to your heart, listen deeply. Either the answer is, "It's God's church," or it is not a church at all. It's a club.

Once a church or a believer arrives at a certain point in life, he or she may be tempted to believe that they have been promoted out of laborer status. Maybe they have now become landowners here. It's my money in the plate, I grew up here, I paid my dues serving on the this committee or that – whatever.

What we read today calls us to reject the attitudes and behaviors that don't testify to God as the author of all good things. When we begin asserting our position, our rank, our tenure, our maturity before God, we forget the Gospel that welcomed us here and welcomes everyone who has been a member of Yates Baptist Church. God's love is a free gift to all, and none of us deserved it.

We can do some personal spiritual reflection on this. What score-keeping and comparison can make us miss is the incredible privilege of being called into God's vineyard at all?

"...None of us lives for ourselves alone," Paul wrote to the Romans, "and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (Romans 14:7-8)

How many times have I heard the testimony of Christians who reflected on the ministries that they dedicated themselves to over the years, how they went out of their way and beyond their customary schedules to care for others? In every conversation they are eager to tell me that they got more in the giving than in their receiving. That's why jealousy, position, score keeping are, quite frankly, irrelevant in the kingdom of heaven.

James Crawford, in his *Minister's Manual*, wrote beautifully about it:

In Christ's vineyard, in contrast to every other vineyard we know, our degrees and seniority, our years of distinguished service, our titles – vice president, chairperson, dean, doctor, professor, honorable, reverend, whatever – are irrelevant to the overriding question: Are you immersed in and compelled by love? Are you serving, and seeking creative community among others? Is your discipleship exercised from a community focused to heal the wounds caused by the conceit of birthrights, the arrogance of racial identities, the disparities of privilege rooted in gender – indeed, all of our pathetic definitions of success reflected in status, income, residence and luck? These distinctions dissolve in the vineyard of Christ.

Because God is faithful and just, we can rely on God's promise to reward those who answer God's call – wherever that may be, whoever that may be – whoever works in the vineyard of God.

This parable, in the end, is about God's generosity. And as difficult as it is to accept sometimes, we cannot control, measure or completely comprehend God's generous love. It is a pearl of great price, a treasure hidden in a field, it is a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one who's lost, an unexpected party to welcome a wayward child home.

We may not be able to comprehend it, not completely, but we can know it. Because that generous love is embodied in Jesus Christ, in a person.

The first – Jesus – became the last, submitting to a way of suffering love for this world. In following him, we are brought into a relationship with God which is eternal life. For all who follow him, who trust in his work, they are sent to work in the world to serve God and others as he did. For some, it begins at the sunrise of their lives, for others at noonday, for others the sunset of their lives. So be it.

Because God is compassionate, that call is issued over and over to us and the world, offering the kingdom to any who will acknowledge their need of grace. We call it "grace" because it is a gift. We cannot buy or earn our way into the transforming relationship Jesus offers, that relationship that makes all things new.

As disciples, we must come to that again and again, and must come back to that often enough. That turning point comes for us in ordinary days and in the extraordinary moments. But as we turn and return and rediscover to what means to believe that grace is true, it can make all the difference – not only the way view ourselves and our relationship to God, but our relationship

to others. Thanks be to God, whose grace is there when we have needed it, and when we will need it still. Amen.