

September 20, 2020 Pentecost 16  
Matthew 20:1-16

Let's dig into this parable of the workers in the vineyard by way of our imaginations. Imagine yourself at the stockholders meeting for the vineyard in the parable. Let's name it the Justice and Grace Vineyards. You are reviewing the financial statements for the year and you see this in the report:

"Fortunately during the harvest, we can find an unlimited pool of available laborers down at the town square. We take the buses down at daybreak in order to find the best people, and we contract for as many as we think we will need that day. If the work extends beyond our projections, we can always go back at 10:00 A.M., or Noon, or even the afternoon, and we can count on there being people there who have not been successful in finding other work. Naturally they are not the strongest or the most talented or they would have been hired elsewhere. Once, at the height of the crush last fall, we hired people as late as 5:00 p.m. and they worked the final two hours until sundown. We paid them the same amount as the folks who had worked for the entire day."

"Point of Order, don't you mean that you paid them on the same scale?"

"No, I mean in fact that we paid them the same amount."

"Let me get this straight, you paid a day's wage to people who had only worked for two hours?"

"Correct, it's what the Owner specified."

And then there is pandemonium: "But that's preposterous!" "That's no way to run a business." "I move that we censure the owner and hire a financial management team to come in and set things right." "I second the motion." "All, in favor..."

Next, imagine yourself at the local union hall for vineyard workers. One articulate young man, face burnished brown, with intense speech and dramatic gesture is describing the experience of working all day long at the

vineyards, and just before quitting time the foreman had brought in an additional bus full of laborers in to help clean up.

"They worked a couple of hours max, in the cool of the evening and when we lined up to get our pay, they got these big checks. Then when we picked up our pay, mind you we had been there in that sun all day, and were not given a penny more."

An audible gasp sweeps the Hall, and then shouts from every corner. When order is finally restored, and after much heated discussion, a moderate course is decided. The word will go out to boycott for one week all vineyard products, and during that week there will be a picket line in front of the vineyard, "Justice and Grace, Unfair to Organized Labor."

Given the tactics of the vineyard owner, the censure of the Annual Meeting, and the reaction of the Labor Union, is not too farfetched. So it gives us more than a little jolt to realize that Jesus is telling this story, and it's one of those stories that is supposed to tell us what God is like, and what the , the kingdom of heaven, the realm of God is all about. God is the vineyard owner. Like so many of Jesus' stories it messes with our norms and values and turns our comfortable world upside down. But also, like many of Jesus' stories, if we stay with it, it can change our lives.

Use your imagination one more time. Imagine your first day in heaven. At first everything seems to be going well, weather is nice, food is good, and everybody seems to be nice. This whole heaven thing is setting up to be pretty good. Then out of the corner of your eye much to your surprise, you see Him! Him could be your old high school bully; Him could be your hothead boss; Him could be your neighbor who was always fighting with his wife, and spent more than one night passed out on his lawn. You never expected to see Him here! Seeing Him here is the one thing about the Kingdom of God that you just don't understand.

When we probe into our case against the vineyard owner, we discover that what upsets us, what we have the most difficulty accepting is his extravagant generosity. He appears to be unfair but only in contrast to his bounteous gifts to the undeserving, to those who did not earn such benevolence and received it anyway. But the reality is that all promises are kept, all contracts are fulfilled. If the parable can be taken as a

presentation of God's administration then we are being assured that God's ways are first of all, just.

Let's dig into the last part of the parable again, starting with the complaint of the workers who started early.

Matthew 20:11-12 "And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, <sup>12</sup> saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'"

"You have made them equal." The Greek word here for equal is "isos." We get words like isosceles triangle from this word—a triangle where all the sides are equal. In Acts 10, Peter is struggling with the concept that God can be the Savior of both the Jews and the Gentiles. And God gives him a vision with net of animals—clean and unclean—dropping down from heaven. God tells him to eat. Peter says he can't eat because some the animals are unclean. God tells Peter, "Don't call anything unclean that I have called clean." And God repeats the vision. Later, when Peter is explaining it to his Jewish friends, he says that God has given the Gentiles and equal gift—an "isos" gift (Acts 11:17). In other words there is an equality of grace, a beautiful equality of grace in the kingdom of God. It is not based on birthright or merit, but on grace—the grace of a loving God who decides to give the free gift of eternal life to us.

"You have made them equal to us." Yes, indeed. That was the complaint of the workers hired first. The Jewish people have been worshipping God since the days of Abraham. Now the Gentiles are coming in at the eleventh hour and God is making them equal—giving them the equal gift of eternal life, salvation, heaven.

You have made them equal to us. Let's take that phrase a little farther. What we see at the cross is God making Jesus equal to us—equally sinful, equally unqualified. And God punished Him for that sin. God punished that sin in Jesus and now makes us equal to Jesus.

Let's finish the parable.

Matthew 20:13-15 **But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs**

to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’

“Or do you begrudge my generosity?” Our translators had to make some jumps here. If you have a study Bible, you will probably see a note on this verse that says the Greek here is literally translated:

“Or is your eye evil because I am good?” Sounds weird, I know. What does it mean? Jump back to the book of Proverbs with me for a moment.

Proverbs 22:9 “Whoever has a **good eye** will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.”

A good eye means you are generous, you share. Oppositely, a bad eye means you don’t. You are not generous. You’re envious. By the way, in Mark 7, when Jesus giving this list of horrible things that come from the human heart—“**sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy...**envy there is literally an “evil eye.”

So God says to the whiners in the parable, “Is your eye evil because I am good.” Or “Are you envious because I blessed other people with my generosity?”

In God’s kingdom, there is an equality of grace, an equality of resurrection. That’s not the way in works in the boardrooms and the union halls. Today we have heard Jesus turn one of our normal, worldly views upside down. In so doing, according to our faith, He actually places those values right-side up. Today’s parable teaches that life is from God’s point of view, not a matter of fairness or unfairness. It is not a matter of deserving or undeserving.

Through today’s parable, Jesus reminds us that whatever we have is, after all, a gift from God. Whatever we have is more than we deserve. God is overwhelmingly generous. It is enough that we have the profound privilege of laboring and serving in God’s vineyard.