



Scripture & Sermon

September 20, 2020

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Matthew 20:1-16

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; **4** and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. **5** When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. **6** And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' **7** They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' **8** When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' **9** When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. **10** Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. **11** And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, **12** 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.' **13** But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? **14** Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. **15** Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' **16** So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Prayer:

Loving and gracious God,

Thank you for this time to be together in our sanctuary that we love so much. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to dig into your word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, amen.

Sermon:

One of the things my family has been experiencing lately is that my grandparents on both sides have been going through the transitions into the later part of senior life. We have been so blessed that up until the loss of my grandfather this spring, all four of my grandparents had been alive. The youngest of the four is 89, so it may be a bit surprising that it until a year ago now, all of them were living at home, mostly independently. It has been a blessing for them, but the time has come, that living independently was not the safest option for them. This means that this has been a year of transitioning them into a new space, which means a lot of downsizing. This has required a LOT of work by their kids, my parents and aunts and uncles. I am sure that almost all of you in this room have been a part of this kind of transition for a family member or for yourself. So, you may be familiar with the drama around dividing up the stuff. There's potential drama around inheritance of course, but also all the things! All the knick knacks, furniture, family heirlooms, sentimental items. From my experience as of late, this situation seems to live in a weird loophole of the universe in which there is both too much to have to deal with and too little to go around. Some families deal with the stress alright, but for some families, this transition of the older generation can really test those family bonds and put them through the wringer. I don't know if these are the conversations every family has, but while I was reading the passage for this week, I was reminded of some of the talk around my family. Mainly, around who appears to be getting the most stuff. For both sets of my grandparents, there is one of the children that has taken on more of the work of getting the house settled, and so they naturally get first pick of the things to pick what they want. For them, there is probably feelings that they deserve more things because they are putting in more work. For the others, there are probably feelings that just because they are not able to assist in the same way, doesn't mean they don't deserve a say on if something is very meaningful to them. All the complicated hurt feelings are based on getting or not getting what they feel they deserve. What is only fair.

The difference between what is considered fair is the core of this week's passage. Today's parable is one that a lot of people don't love. It seems unfair! It doesn't make sense. This parable touches on one of the things that we, as humans, often don't question: what is fair? Fairness is something we like to think about as objective, but this parable reminds us, that our idea of fairness is often based on just that, our ideas. It is what we have decided it is, and what we decide is fair is often dependent on how we are affected by the situation. We are more likely to feel something is fair when it advantages us, and the opposite when something disadvantages us. That is what we see play out in the story from Matthew 20:1-16. This parable is one that I was familiar with. When I first read it to prepare for this sermon I

thought, “Oh yeah, I know this one.” But the more I dug into it and thought about it, and then re-read it, I realized there are so many details to this story that I had not fully absorbed! This parable, as recorded by Matthew, is truly a well-told story that ropes in readers, builds our expectations alongside the characters, and then flips them to teach the lesson. This story is posed to us again with “for the kingdom of heaven is like...” so this is a lesson from Jesus on how things are in heaven, but also a teaching for us on how to live into the Kingdom of heaven here on earth. The parable starts in a place that would have been familiar to the original readers, who knew the agricultural life. As was Jewish custom, the landowner goes out at the very beginning of the day to hire laborers, promising them a day’s work and day’s pay. The story states here that it was “after agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.” So, these first workers did agree to a specific pay before they began their work. Also, something highlighted in my research this week, is that the daily wage would have been a living wage, pay that was just enough to sustain a laborer for a day.

This is when the story would have gotten a little strange to those familiar with the life of a landowner. The landowner, not a manager, goes out again, and upon seeing idle laborers, he offers them work, with the promise of “I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. And we are made to ask the question “What is the right pay?” He goes out and does the same twice more. He then goes one last time, and even though it is 5 o’clock, one hour before the end of the work day, he doesn’t ignore these idle workers. This time he asks them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” Their answer is, “Because no one has hired us.” This response is important. They weren’t left unhired because they were lazy, because they showed up to the market late, but because no one hired them. This makes us ask the question, “Who are those that we keep idle because we don’t hire them?” The landowner sends even those who would only get in an hour of work to the vineyard.

So, now it is evening, it is typical pay time. But, the landowner tells his manager to pay the last hired workers, first. The first group, the last hired, receives their pay, and it is the usual daily wage! The text doesn’t directly say, but we should know that those hired in the middle are then paid in order from latest-hired to earliest hired. We can assume that they all received the same daily wage. So, it is finally the first-hired’s turn. They worked the longest, they just watched every other group get paid the daily wage, which was what they were promised. Yet, here they are, stepping up for their pay, and they are expecting that they would receive more because they worked the longest. Surprise! They don’t. They are given the daily wage. And, ooooo, they grumble. They grumble like a family who is upset that Samantha got all of grandma’s teacups. “These last guys worked for only an hour and you have made them equal to us who worked in the hot sun all day!” The landowner is ready with his response, “Friend,” he says, and this is definitely a sarcastic “friend” as used in other parts of Matthew. If I were saying it, I would be saying, “Bud?” Anyway, disparagingly, he says, “Friend, I am doing you no

wrong; didn't we agree before you started work that you would receive the usual daily wage? Take what is owed to you, it is yours now, and go. I have chosen to pay you all the same. Can't I do whatever I want with what belongs to me? Do you have your panties in a bunch because I am generous to someone else?" Okay maybe I embellished there at the end.

Jesus ends the parable with this line to wrap it up: "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." This phrase is important because it ties this story to the one that came just before this one in Matthew. The story just before it is the story of the Rich Ruler who asks Jesus how to guarantee his ticket to Heaven and Jesus tells him to sell everything he has and give it all to the poor, and the rich ruler says he isn't willing to do that, and Jesus compares the ruler to a camel going through the eye of a needle. The Disciple's response to this is to say "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus's response here ends with, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first." The use of the phrase in reverse is to get us to pay attention to these stories together. The rich ruler rejects Jesus's teaching because he doesn't want to give up being one of the firsts, and the first-hired laborers are resentful because they don't want to be treated the same as the lasts. If we think of both together, the simplest conclusion is that for God, there are no firsts and no lasts. They also make quite the statement about how we are supposed to think about and treat those who are poor or seen as less than by society--which is equally.

Some interpret this story to be a lesson on how not to be, that this was a bad, unfair landowner. But, the repetition of "the last being first and first being last" and that this comes right after the Disciples expect more reward from Jesus because they have done the most work for Jesus's cause, makes this parable seem like pointed advice. This little story, this parable, that Jesus tells, seems all too pointed toward the Disciples, who, as it often goes in Matthew, just don't seem to get the whole thing Jesus is trying to do quite yet. Jesus puts them in the role of the first laborer, and that is who we are supposed to learn from for ourselves. Through the story, Jesus is reprimanding the selfish thinking, but more than that he is challenging the status quo, he is challenging the Disciples' idea of how things ought to be. Jesus is redefining the rules for what is fair and just which challenges the cultural norms and social structures of the time. And really, of all time, as Jesus's lesson continues to challenge us today. We still live with the mottos that people get what they deserve or get what they work for, we accept the reality that there are the haves and have nots. Our country was built on the idea that if someone works hard and does the right things that they will find success. Jesus is challenging all of those standards with this parable. We are made to ask the question, from this parable, "What is right?" Jesus's answer, through the landlord's actions, is that all should have enough. It is made clear that the first laborers are promised the daily wage, or enough to maintain someone for a day, and the rest are paid what the landowner said "is right." The other laborers get to the work late, because the landowner

comes upon them late in the day and finds out that they were not hired. That is the only stipulation for them to get some work and for them to deserve a day's wage, no matter the length or toil of that work. So, all should have enough, but the reprimand to the first-hired who get upset for getting less than what they thought they deserved in comparison to others, that also reminds us that we don't deserve more than enough, anything more than enough should be thought of as a gift. All that is on this earth, all that we are given, all that we call ours, is really God's and so we should not be getting a big head about what we deserve. This story also tells us that even those who work very little, or who by the merits of the system should not receive much, still deserve to equally have enough. They have rights to have enough to maintain the essentials, which are food and water, shelter, healthcare. This passage reminds us that no matter someone's circumstances, Jesus calls us to not begrudge anyone equal rights.

I would be remiss, when speaking of equal rights, to not mention Ruth Bader Ginsburg. It seems only too fitting that she passed this week that we are talking about what is right and just while she fought literally to her death bed to bring that to fruition as best she could within this country. She started as a champion for gender equality laws, pushing and pushing against the social norms by going to law school, practicing law, and taking on controversial cases. Her work recognized that just because something had been that way, decided by those who came before us, did not mean that it was right or just. As she worked, there were plenty of people who were like the first-hired laborers in the parable who complained, feeling like because those who they saw as should be getting less than them were being given equal treatment. She did not let them bring her down or stop her work. She used the power and systems that she had and made a difference for all women in the United States. Her strength, gumption, and quiet passion inspired and continue to inspire so many, and she will be so missed. Though she may be gone, the work is not done, there is much to be done in the field of gender equality so that women are not held back by those who believe they do not deserve to be treated equally. There is still so much work to be done in our country and around the world to bring God's idea of fairness to life, to help everyone have enough.

That doesn't mean that there are not places where Jesus's message from this passage are being lived out. I think of things like our Food Pantry where we give to a family just as long as they are within the Hopkins School District, but their income or financial status does not matter. We are giving equally to those families because we believe that all deserve to have enough food for their family.

God's idea stretches beyond just the physical necessities too. Yes, we need those things to survive, but we also need God. Though the Landowner and God are not a direct comparison, this parable also reminds us of how people become Christians at various times. In the original context this story was written down in, there was some tension between Jewish-Christians, or those who were coming to the faith already having years of believing in God, and the Gentile Christians, who were totally new to the

faith. Acts tell us of many disagreements between Paul and the rest of the disciples as it came to gentile inclusion. In this story, the landowner invites all the laborers to come work for him, their timing is different but they are offered the same work. Just as God equally invites all of us, old and new to the faith, to be a part of God's work on earth. While the landowner showed that they were all equal by payment, **God makes us all equal by grace**. Even though we do not deserve it, even though we often mess up, even though all of our faith journeys are different and some seem better at faith than others, God gives us grace equally. Now, before we trip up over the same issue, this does not mean we can presume or expect God's grace in a certain capacity, or at all, but we must remember that we ought not look around us and think that we deserve more than anyone else. Let us take this passage as the reminder it was to the Disciples and check what we have been thinking we deserve and shift our idea of what is fair to God's standards, instead of our own.

Let us pray.

Gracious and Just God,

You sent your son to teach us and challenge us in new ways so that we could better live out your kingdom here on earth. Sometimes, we get so wrapped up in our own ideas that when your way comes about, we grumble and argue. Today, we were reminded of the parable of the landowner who hires the many laborers but pays them all the same wage. Holy Spirit, help us to truthfully recognize who we are in the story. Help us to listen to Jesus's advice here and call ourselves out if we are expecting more than we deserve. Inspire us to live as fighters for justice and fairness in the ways that are according to your will. Help all those without enough find someone or someplace that can help them get there. Help us move toward justice and equality for all those who remained unhired, who look idle and lazy and are deemed as unworthy by those who have so much more than them. God, you shower us with your amazing grace, even when we really don't deserve it. Thank you for always teaching us how to better live out your Kingdom here on earth. We pray all this in the name of the Son and Spirit, AMEN