

## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 20, 2020

### Introduction

**Today's Gospel raises fundamental questions for those who aspire to be disciples of Jesus.** *Is God's grace fair? How can God offer forgiveness to everyone who repents, even if they are the worst of sinners? Can a person be ever be beyond the grace of God?* These questions are profound because they are really asking if there are limits of God's grace. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus explores this with the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*,

**A word about parables.** Parables are teaching devices. The word 'parabole' in Greek means 'to lay alongside.' A parable is a story that is 'to lay alongside' everyday life and challenge the hearer's understanding of the present reality. One cannot hear a parable passively; they are designed to force the hearer to make a choice about a fundamental value. Barbara Reid in her book, *Parables for Preaching — Year B*, writes that the purpose of a parable is 'to persuade the hearer to adopt a particular view of God and life in God's realm. It's aim is to convert the hearer. Parables turn the world upside down by challenging presumptions, reversing expectations, and proposing a different view of life with God.'

**I believe that the key to this parable is to realize that is about grace, not fairness.** Grace is a difficult concept for us to understand because we live in a world where one has to 'earn their own keep.' The witness of the Scripture is that God's grace is never earned; but rather, freely given. St Paul reminds the Roman Christians that, '*... God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.*' [Romans 5.8 & 8.1]. What the apostle Paul is telling the Romans is that grace is truly a gift from God, undeserved by its recipients. Enjoy our Lord Jesus' parable and be open to the radical nature of God's grace.

**Worship Note:** We will again worship outdoors on September 27, October 11, and October 25 [Bethel – 8:30 am & Immanuel – 10:30 am]. We will celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Volunteers are need to assist with set before the services.

**In Christ ✝,  
Pastor Steve**

## **Gospel – Matthew 20.1-16**

**[And Jesus said,] “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.**

**“<sup>6</sup>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?' <sup>7</sup>They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' <sup>8</sup>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.'**

**“<sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <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.' <sup>13</sup>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? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

### **“A Perfect Timecard”**

**Let us pray.** My pastoral prayer this morning is based on the explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed given by Martin Luther.

Dearest Jesus, truly God and truly human, you are my Lord. At great cost, you have redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature; not with gold and silver, but with your holy and precious blood, your innocent suffering, and your lonely death . . . All this so that I might be your own and live under you in your kingdom and serve you with everlasting righteousness, blessedness, and innocence. Grant this

to me, Lord Jesus, as you are risen from the dead and live and rule eternally. Amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Every employee looks forward to payday.** That is when one receives their just compensation for services rendered. Paydays allow us to service our debts, take care of our families, and to indulge ourselves and enjoy our money. Some of us receive our compensation as salaries while others paid an hourly wage. Whatever the case, there is an implicit trust between employer and employee that all will be done honestly and fairly — just compensation for time worked. And, for the most part, this system works.

**Several years ago, I stumbled upon an internet site that dealt exclusively with payroll fraud by both employers and employees.** They are Individuals who illegally take advantage of the system. It made for fascinating reading.

**There was one story that I particularly enjoyed.** In Colin County, Texas, the district attorney's office had to recuse itself from prosecuting six assistant clerks of court for falsifying timecards. Not only were they were giving out additional hours to 'special employees,' they also were compensating themselves for hours worked on the Chief Deputy Clerk's campaign in the fall of last year. Even though those accused attempted to justify their actions with claims that 'it's only fair' and 'we deserve this benefit,' their actions were blatantly illegal. They were prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

**The most common reason given for falsifying pay vouchers is one of fairness.** Employees feel that they deserve more money for the work they are doing. Employers often believe that those who work for them do not deserve what they receive. These arguments have only been heightened during the pandemic induced financial crisis. Workers and companies are all concerned about wages and how to make ends meet.

**That is what makes today's Gospel so interesting.** Jesus takes time cards and turns payroll accounting on its head. As a matter of fact, the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* is truly a payroll clerk's nightmare. Instead of being concerned about

the labor cost for harvesting the crop, the owner throws common sense to the wind when he does the payroll. But a word of caution: I don't think we're ready to hear what Jesus has to say about accounting in the Kingdom. It might make us a bit uncomfortable.

***It was harvest time in Palestine, the grapes in the vineyard were ripe, and they had to be picked as soon as possible.*** The cold rains and frost could come at any time and spoil the crop. So the landowner went to the marketplace early in the morning looking for workers. In those days, the work day began at 6:00 am and continued until dusk. The going wage was a denarius a day; barely enough to provide food and shelter for one's family. Today, at \$10/hr, that would be \$120 for a day's work.

***Returning to the marketplace at nine o'clock, then at noon, and again at three o'clock, he found more workers standing idle.*** He hired them, saying, 'Go into the vineyard, and whatever is right, I will give you.' So they joined the others in the field working under the scorching heat of the Mediterranean sun. Then, at the eleventh hour, an hour before dusk, he went back to the market place found still others who were not working. Undoubtedly, they were not the cream of the crop when it came to workers. They were right when they said that no one would hire them. They were the deadbeats and losers who no one would have. But there were still grapes in the vineyard, so the landowner hired them also and told them to go to work.

***Had the parable ended there, everything, I think, would have been all right.*** We could have walked away from it with the simple message that God seeks workers for the vineyard and that the Master will stop at nothing to bring in the harvest — even to the point of hiring losers to do the job. Had Jesus stopped there, we would have concluded that God puts a high priority on missions. We would assume that the point of the parable is that sharing the Gospel of Jesus with the world is of extreme importance.

***But that is not the way parables work.*** There is more. God hires both twelve-hour workers and the 'johnny-come-lately' one hour workers. One of our conclusions is that Jesus directs us to willingly accept them as co-workers with us in the Kingdom. Again, if Jesus would have stopped there, we would have no trouble

with the parable. We all know that more hands mean less work for each of us. We can live with that.

**But much to our chagrin, Jesus continued the story.** As required by Mosaic Law, the workers were paid at the end of the workday. However, the Master chose to break with convention. He told his crew manager to bring the workers to him in reverse order; those who worked the least would be the first to receive their wages. To the surprise of everyone, those who worked only one hour, received a full day's pay — a denarius (or \$120). And likewise, the others who worked less than a full day. So, when those who had worked twelve hours in the hot sun came to receive their pay, they expected much more. After all, fair was fair, everyone knew how this was supposed to work: *If one hour earns a \$120, twelve hours in the sun should get twelve times as much — \$1440.* It was as simple as that. Their anticipation was unbounded.

**You can imagine their surprise when they also received the same \$120 as the one-hour workers.** They were outraged. You can just hear them: 'Who does he think he is anyway? He can't do that; it's not fair. We'll report him to the wage and hour people. We deserve more than the others.' So they complained bitterly to the Master, 'They worked only one hour and you've made them equal to us, who worked twelve hours out in the hot sun.' The Master replied, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me to work for a denarius . . . Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' Jesus added, '*SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST.*'

**What makes this parable so troubling is that those who hear it are forced to conclude that God isn't fair.** It is obvious that God does not play by the rules; or at least by rules we know. The point of the parable is that God plays by God's own set of rules – Rules that always makes winners out of losers. *We must remember that this is a parable of grace, not a parable of fairness.* The rules of accounting in the Kingdom are truly an accountant's nightmare . . . Nothing seems to make sense because God is not predictable. In God's ledgers, nobody gets what they deserve.

**So what exactly are the rules for accounting in the Kingdom? There are three master rules that govern every transaction . . . Three simple rules: First, God**

**doesn't look at a person's potential cost/benefit ratio before adding them to the team.** In the words of the parable, the landowner faces a potential disaster. Timing is everything. The grapes ripen and will spoil if not harvested immediately. One never knew when the weather would turn foul and ruin the crop. Harvesting a vineyard takes labor — hand labor. And the faster the grapes are pulled from the vines, the better. The better workers were obviously taken first. Each ensuing trip to the marketplace brought workers of less ability and desire. You can just imagine the quality of the one hour workers. A good accountant would tell you that you'd never get your money's worth out of losers like them. But the owner does not listen, he hires them anyway.

**What the people of God need to learn is that the task before them is imperative.** We must be about our Lord's business of bearing witness to the Kingdom of God to anyone who will listen. The world has a 'sickness unto death' and we are the only ones who have the antidote. And it is our job to share it with the world. The task is imperative and needs all kinds of workers – Twelve hour workers as well as one hour workers. We all have a contribution to make. There are no losers in the Kingdom. We all have a job that only we can do.

**Second, fairness is not part of the accounting standard for the Kingdom.** Twelve hour workers are always paid the same as one hour workers. God isn't into the score keeping that we think gives order to the world. Phrases like 'getting what they deserve' and 'What goes around, comes around' have no place in the Kingdom. Such thinking presupposes that there is a grand ledger for every person where deeds are scored as 'good' or 'bad' and salvation is awarded on the basis of one's total score.

But that's not the way accounting is done in the Kingdom of God. Grace is not fair; it is loving. By this I mean that God will do everything to bring in the harvest and this means offering life in the Kingdom to everyone who is in the market place. God says to each worker, 'I will you give what is right' . . . *And right for God is life in the Kingdom for sinners . . . sinners who are bought with the precious blood of Jesus!* Not because we deserve it, but because God chooses to give it. According the parable, God is a Master Payroll Clerk who is unpredictable. God is unpredictable because God love us more than life itself. Despite our desire that everyone, 'get what they deserve,' God offers the same gracious gift to everyone.

**And finally third, when the accounts totaled and the books are closed for each of us, God never looks at them again.** That's the accountant's nightmare: *All that work . . . All that time keeping score and it makes no difference at all. God already knows what the books will show . . . God knows that we are sinners . . . And God knows that we deserve death. That's why he throws them out: He is a God of life, not a God of death. He gives us the 'perfect timecard.'*

**So today, Jesus leaves us with some questions: 'If God doesn't look at the ledgers we keep for ourselves and for others, why do we bother to keep them at all?'** Why keep score if we're already winners?' Answer if you must, but first get in line because God is handing out the gift of life. Amen.