

**September 24, 2017 (Journey worship)**

**TEXT: Matthew 20:1–16**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Sometimes when Jesus told a parable, afterwards he would offer an explanation of it so that the disciples would understand the lesson he was trying to teach. There is no explanation after this parable from Matthew 20. It doesn't need one. Its message comes across loud and clear, whether we want to hear or not.

Whenever I read this parable, the lingering image comes from the end of it—the face-off between the landowner and the grumpy day-workers. Everyone's worked in the fields—some more or less—but all are paid the same wage. The full day-workers complain about their payment and how it isn't fair that they received the same amount after working all day in the hot sun as the people who only worked for one hour. That's the lingering image from this parable. But in the actual text, the word "fair" or "fairness" is never used. The complainers used these words: *You have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day.* Equality is the issue here. And the landowner's response also avoids talking about fairness. Instead he says "*Are you envious because I am generous?*" Equality—generosity—Remember those words as we let the deep message of this crystal-clear parable sink into our hearts this day.

Let's first consider a couple details that fill in the blanks about how to understand this parable of the generous vineyard owner. First, notice how many times the owner goes back to bring more workers to the vineyard. He travels to the meeting place—perhaps near the city gates—at sunrise, 9:00 am, noon, 3:00 pm, and finally at five o'clock. He's persistent. Five times he makes the journey into town, calling for more people to follow him and find work in his fields. It sounds similar to the work of Jesus—how he never gave up on people; how he invited the fishermen on this day and the tax collector on that day to follow him; how all Christians are to be persistent in our outreach and sharing the good news with others. So in a real way, the owner's generosity wasn't just seen in the money he paid. A denarius was simply a minimum daily wage that would keep you just above the poverty line. The owner's generosity was seen in these repeated invitations, working hard to make sure no one was left out of the church—oops, did I say that?—I mean, left out of the vineyard.

Second, in a book called The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes, the author Justo Gonzales notes that this parable evokes different reactions, depending on whether the hearers are Anglo or Hispanic listeners. Gonzales says that Hispanic audiences can identify with the problems of the field workers. They understand the laborer who travels around in his pickup truck trying to find work with little success—who some days is left standing around waiting hoping a job will materialize. And when the vineyard owner pays out the wages, the Hispanic congregation applauds when the laborers who worked for only one hour get paid a full day's wage. They understand that everyone looking for work and waiting for work need a day's pay to survive. They rejoice that they are paid what they need, rather than treated as a machine and paid less than is humane. They rejoice at the grace present in this parable that works contrary to legalistic "fairness"—and how it

is a story showing what true justice and God's standards of generosity look like in this world.

The real power of this parable is that it sets before us two groups of people and asks us on which side do we wish to stand. There is the side of the owner who pays everyone a full day's wage—an owner who made multiple trips to find workers, an owner surrounded with Anglo and Hispanic and African American and other people of good hearts who simply want to provide for their families' basic needs. And on the other side is a group of grumblers—those who argue for fairness based on a definition of that word that privileges them, that makes sure they are treated better than others whom the landowner has wrongly made equal to them.

The bible has its fair share of grumblers: There's the prophet Jonah who gets mad at God for not raining down destruction upon Nineveh when the Ninevites actually listen to his preaching and turn from their sins. Jonah sulks and is offended by God's generosity and forgiveness. Or there's the Elder Brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the one who sees the father offer forgiveness to the son who returned—the one whom everyone thought was dead but now he is found alive. This elder brother refuses to go into the celebration banquet because he is angry about being made equal once more to his wayward younger brother. Or there's the obnoxious Pharisee who prayed loudly in the Jerusalem temple, *"Thank you God that I am not like other men—those thieves, rogues, adulterers, and even like this sinful tax collector standing near to me."* Jesus mentioned that man and went on to say *"all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."* Today's parable describes for us two groups of people and asks quite clearly: On which side do you wish to stand? The grateful or the grumblers?

I was recently reminded of something that happened to me many years ago. I was visiting the maternity wing of a hospital and was about to enter the elevator when a father and a little two-year-old girl came rushing down the hallway and asked me to hold the elevator for them. The little girl called the elevator the "moving room" and the father was kidding her about being in the "moving room." We chatted for a bit and I asked if there was a new arrival in their family, to which the man said, "Yes, my wife just had a baby." So I asked, "Is it a copy of this little girl or does she now have a brother?" The father smiled and looked right at me and said, "Our baby is a Down's Syndrome little girl and we're all doing fine." We talked a bit more before he and his little girl happily went on their way.

I didn't know the young man. He didn't have to tell me his new child had Down's Syndrome. What struck me was that he was consciously being upbeat about his new daughter, for the sake of his other daughter and his family and the world in general. He left no doubt that the baby's birth was a gift and a joy and would never be characterized as anything other than that. It was a modern parable reminding me of the difference between arguments around fairness and spirits of generosity. I remember thinking how lucky both little girls in that family were.

Jesus tells us a parable about an owner who goes back five times, calling and welcoming those left behind to come join him in the work of the world. This owner pays the workers based on their need, not based on what some secular economist or accountant would determine they had earned—and that detail cheers the souls of lots of people today who know full well that it is only by grace they can keep their heads above the rising waters of poverty and despair.

Jesus tells us this parable and then asks us where do we want to stand: beside the generous owner or amidst the small circle of grumblers—the prideful ones angry someone else has been made equal to them, the sulking Jonahs and Elder Brothers and Self-Righteous Pharisees of the world? It's a parable not about fairness, but about generosity—not about hierarchy but a reminder that the first will be last and the least will be at the head of the line in heaven.

One last thing: Wrapped up in this parable is a wonderful promise extended to us. In truth, we are all eleventh hour workers. We are people recruited to work in God's fields at the last minute who will receive benefits far exceeding what we deserve to be paid. We wake up each day into a world we didn't make. Through Christ Jesus we live each day as recipients of a salvation and redemption we didn't earn. We enter this worship space as mixed-bags of virtue and vice, every one of us: do-gooders and not-done-so-gooders; recovering alcoholics, cancer or bulimia or addiction survivors, people who've known triumph and disappointment, love and abuse; folks acquainted with date rape, violence, bankruptcy, indebtedness, who some days awake with a spring in our steps or other days find it hard to get our heads off our pillows.

Whatever our stories—whatever way the world has chosen to treat us, categorize, define, deride or discriminate against us—a different reality is revealed when we stand before Christ and come together to worship Christ. I won't tell you that your life situations don't matter. I won't glibly pretend we can erase the past stories or wipe away the past scars that have shaped who we are. But I will affirm that as we stand before the vineyard owner, 11<sup>th</sup>-hour workers every one of us, we are seen differently. We are recipients of grace and generosity and love. And after being handed those spiritual wages, we next face an important choice: Whom shall I stand beside now? Who is my brother and sister? Whose birth can I tell about joyfully in a public elevator? Whose re-birth by grace can I support and celebrate right beside me? What wonderful convergence of God's hope and human redemption can I recognize in my own life and in the life of other workers just like me? And in the end, is there anything more important than that for us to be doing this very day?

Thanks be to God.