

September 20, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Matthew 20:1–16](#)

TITLE: **Beloved of God**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Antonio Salieri was born in 1750. He was a talented Italian musician, who was taken to Vienna, Austria while still a teenager. He soon found a place composing music for Emperor Joseph II. In time Salieri reached the pinnacle of fame, serving as the Emperor's Hofkapellmeister—court composer. He was a man of strong faith who lived to be 75 years old, and who wrote mostly sacred music for the last 20 years of his life. Yet into his world came an Austrian upstart, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Mozart was a child prodigy who took the music world by storm. He was young, brash, a cyclone of creative energy, a challenger of tradition. And while there is no clear evidence of a rivalry between these two men, it does seem possible that Salieri had to begrudge all the hard-earned attention taken from him and given to this latecomer. On some level, Salieri must have thought to himself, “Lord, it just isn’t fair!”

Fairness seems to be at the heart of the teaching parable in Matthew 20. Various laborers were brought to work in a vineyard over the course of a day. Some started at sunrise; others at nine or noon; still others at three or even at five o'clock near the end of the day. The staggered shifts, though, weren't the problem. The problem was that the owner paid them all the same wage and paid the last ones first. This meant that the workers who had been in the vineyard the longest were standing around and saw the late arrivals getting paid a full denarius for only a few hours work. By the time the early hires reached the paymaster, they grumbled that this just wasn't fair. Actually, no, they didn't use the word “fair.” Their complaint was this: “*You have made them equal to us.*” Fairness may be the way arguments are framed, but often the real issue is the belief that if someone is going to play favorites, make sure I'm the one you're favoring!

We've heard complaints like this before in the bible. The cantankerous prophet Jonah preached repentance to the people of Nineveh, and then got angry when his preaching worked and God did not destroy the people for their sins. And in the Prodigal Son parable, the younger brother finally returns home and is welcomed lavishly by his loving father. But the father's generosity infuriates the elder son, who labored away while the prodigal was absent, and now his brother has been made his equal again. It just wasn't right; but then, who gets to define what's right and wrong—God or us?

I was talking with my brother the other day, and he mentioned that he had one employee who thought it was okay to sleep in, making sure he had breakfast with his kids, and only showed up to work around 10, while the others had already been on the job since 7. My brother had to shift him from a daily salary rate to a task-based rate; otherwise the rest of the work crew would grumble about the unfairness of the one guy getting paid the same rate for working fewer hours.

I realized it was the same scenario as this parable. Now, I didn't lecture my brother to go and read Matthew 20. The parable Jesus told wasn't about business practices. It

was about something bigger. It was a parable about God, about God's grace and how all people deserve to be treated.

Point #1: These types of labor pools still exist today. Migrant workers still gather before dawn in meeting places, hoping to get picked to do the hard work of gathering crops or working in landscaping. In many cases, if they don't get hired, they don't eat or their families go hungry. In addition, think about the number of people who work for tips in restaurants but who are out of work or barely making it during this pandemic. Unfair labor practices exist all over America. The question for people of faith isn't about how much to pay one who works 8 hours versus one who works 4 hours; the question is why do we allow systems to exist that treat people as cogs in a machine exploited and taken advantage of for someone else's profit?

Fifty years ago, Milton Friedman wrote an influential article titled "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits." He prioritized the work of business as simply to increase the profits of shareholders—those who invested in that company and received financial dividends from its work. Friedman's flawed perspective is the opposite of Matthew 20. Thankfully a more enlightened business philosophy now insists that the social responsibility of business is to benefit all stakeholders—the shareholders, plus the employees, the suppliers, the customers, and the communities in which they operate.¹ Remember: Wealth does not trickle down. It pools and collects in the pockets and bank accounts of those who too often today write laws to protect their own interests, denigrate workers' rights, and decimate our environment. Matthew 20 calls us to a more just and generous model of doing business.

Point #2: Why did the vineyard owner keep going back to get more workers? Maybe he needed their help to gather in his harvest. But more likely, he saw the injustice in this business model and he acted out of compassion to provide for those whom others would treat as expendable. He brought them into his fields so they'd at least have food for that day. That motivation is clear when you recall the owner's comment in vs. 15. When others grumbled about the payment plan, the owner responded: "Are you envious because I am generous?" Imagine if the worst thing someone could say about you was that you were too generous! That's one criticism we should all hope is included in the eulogies spoken at our funerals—that we were too generous!

The vineyard owner wanted to demonstrate that a different way of living together is truly possible. That is why the last workers were paid first. So that all would see that something other than profit-based capitalism was at work here. Something other than penalizing the latecomers was guiding the business model here. Worldly hierarchies are too often based on flawed, biases and racist prejudices: men over women, white over black or brown, native born over migrant, heterosexual over other gender identities, able-bodied over differently-abled. This type of hierarchical thinking should not rule our lives. We may not automatically choose grace and generosity, but God does. Which is why we need God—we need Christ in our lives—we need the Holy Spirit of grace to soften our hearts of stone, unlock our purses of prejudice, and re-define us as a diverse people all working in the same vineyard, serving the same Lord.

Lastly, point #3: The ancient Roman philosopher Seneca once said, “*Human society is like a vault of stones, which would fall if the stones did not rest on one another.*”² All of us Pennsylvanians understand that concept. We live in the Keystone state; we know that an arch is only possible because all the stones work together—and draw their stability from the central keystone.

Learning to see, really see, one another is critical to a life well-lived. But even more important, learning to appreciate and celebrate God’s grace active in someone else’s life is critical to living in a faithful community. Think about it. If you only appreciate God’s goodness because of how God has blessed you, you’ll quickly tell yourself that somehow you earned it. You are a good person, so you’re worth God’s blessings! But if you can see God’s blessings given to someone else—a prodigal brother who just returned home; or the hated citizens of Nineveh given a second chance—or to a new arrival in the vineyard or new migrant on American soil—or a young musician newly welcomed into the emperor’s court or a young legislator elected to office refusing to play politics as usual. If you can rejoice at God’s generous grace shown to another, you’ll be well on the way to understanding the parable of Matthew 20. And even better, you’ll be well on the way to living faithfully, justly, and kindly after the example of Jesus Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, I am a big fan of the movie about Salieri and Mozart. Even if there isn’t historical evidence for this musical rivalry, it’s a great story and a great film. But notice that the film wasn’t called “Mozart.” It is titled after the composer’s middle name—“Amadeus.” Ama: from the Italian verb “to love” and Deus, which simply means “God.” Amadeus—beloved of God. So start from the assumption that Amadeus is everyone’s middle name. I challenge you today to call 10 people by that name, Amadeus, wherever you see them—by the side of the road waiting for work, behind the counter hoping for tips, behind bars waiting to be free, struggling behind a computer trying to learn remotely or in front of a camera trying to teach from afar; wherever—and whoever. And include yourself in this ritual of re-naming. Amadeus. Beloved of God. For so you are—and so they are, thanks to a loving, generous God.

AMEN

¹ Andrew Ross Sorkin, “The Thought Heard Round the World.” *New York Times*, September 13, 2020, Dealbook section.

² James Michener, *Iberia*, p. 184.