

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 20, 2026 – 17 Pentecost
Matthew 20:1-16 – Workers in the Vineyard
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

If the parables of Jesus are meant to get our attention, this one certainly does its job!

In Matthew's Gospel, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard follows the account of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man. A Jewish man who kept all the Ten Commandments came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus told him to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then follow him. Unable – at least at that moment – to do this, the young man "went away grieving." We may relate to this man's feelings of grief if, for some reason, we have had to let go of possessions we have valued. Perhaps you have been able to do what Jesus asked of the young man, selling your possessions and giving the money away, to help others or to support the church. Perhaps you feel called to do that now.

After the man left, Jesus and his disciples had further conversation. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." Listen to what Peter then asks. "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus' answer is this parable. You have just heard the story of a landowner and the workers he hires, some early in the morning and many later in the day. All the workers agree to work for "the usual daily wage," which was one denarius, a Roman silver coin. Scholars' best guess is that this would supply a family with three to six days of food, a fair payment, though not exorbitant.

When the end of the workday arrives, the landowner instructs the manager of the vineyard to pay the laborers their wages. Those hired last receive a full day's pay. Those hired first saw this and thought that since they had labored since early morning, they would receive more. Remember Peter's words to Jesus: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" When they received the agreed upon daily wage, "they grumbled against the landowner, 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.'" Their complaint seems reasonable, doesn't it? It wasn't fair!

I imagine that when Jesus' disciples first heard this parable, they were startled, maybe even alarmed. These disciples had left their homes and jobs and families and friends to follow him. They had worked beside Jesus, enduring hardship and antagonism from people who did not receive Jesus' message. But they stuck with him, even when he explained that he was on a journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Surely, they were laborers who had put in a long, hard day, laborers who deserved their wages. Shouldn't they expect more than the followers of Jesus who had done less, given up less? "What do you mean, they get the same reward as we do? It's not fair!"

Many of us here this morning are hard workers, too. We have given generously of our time, talent, and treasure to the church. We help our neighbors, give of our resources to support humanitarian efforts in our community and around the world. We labor to protect the earth and all God's creatures. We share our knowledge and skills with others. Some of us can look back on decades of such service. In our hearts we may see ourselves as laborers who began early in the morning, who deserve our wages more than others. Perhaps, thinking of ourselves as good Christians, we expect God to do more for us than for others who have done less, given up less. "What do you mean, they get the same reward as we do? It's not fair!"

In this parable Jesus invites us to a radically new vision of life, a “kingdom of God” perspective rather than a “kingdom of this world” perspective. The landowner’s primary concern is for the laborers and their needs. From a worldly perspective, the landowner is foolish. He would soon “go out of business” if he paid a full day’s wages to workers who worked for only one hour! But the landowner’s concern is not to make as much profit as he can. His concern is to give the laborers what they need – all of them, the “undeserving” as well as the “deserving.” Because the landowner is generous. Jesus teaches this lesson repeatedly. In the words of this morning’s Psalm (145:8), “The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness.”

The landowner is free to do what he chooses with what belongs to him. I find his question to the grumblers interesting: “are you envious because I am generous?” He sees that the first laborers resent the generous blessings given to those hired later. Their focus has shifted from gratitude for what the landowner has given them – the opportunity to work and a fair wage – to envy and resentment of those who seem to be more generously paid.

This parable challenges us to examine what we really think about God’s lavish generosity and mercy. Of course, we are all perfectly happy to think about God’s generosity and mercy toward ourselves! And to those people we love and care for. In fact, we pray for our needs and the needs of others trusting in God’s mercy and generosity. But how do we feel about God’s generosity and mercy toward the people we regard as undeserving, toward our enemies? Jesus instructs us, his disciples, to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Can we, from our hearts, feel good about the idea that our enemies will receive the joys of heaven and eternal life? That’s what the landowner – God – is offering. It’s what I want for myself and what I want for you, but is it what I want for people who have harmed me, people I hold in contempt? When I ask myself that question, I’m sure that my mind is not yet aligned with the mind of Christ. I can only pray for a change of heart.

Through this parable Jesus offers us a lesson in humility. He reminds us that the landowner has given us both the opportunity and the ability to work. God has given us our lives, our souls. God has given us God’s love. God has given those of us called to be in the church special gifts – to hear the word of God in the Bible, to receive grace through the sacraments, to live Christian lives in the fellowship of a community of believers. As God’s creatures who have received all these blessings, God can’t possibly “owe” us anything. And if we give all our lives to God, is this any more than God has given us? “Freely you have received, now freely give,” Jesus teaches.

Instead of making the mistake Peter made, seeing ourselves as the laborers who worked since early morning, we may need to see ourselves as the laborers who arrived closer to five o’clock. It helps me to think of famous people who have spent their lives devoted to the welfare of others for the love of God – Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King, Jr. come to mind. And I think about people I have met, in church or elsewhere. People who have gotten far ahead of me spiritually, who are more loving, more generous, more forgiving, closer to God, more Christ-centered than I am. Can you think of people whom you admire, even stand in awe of, who follow Jesus very nearly? If we consider ourselves in relation to these people, we may indeed see ourselves as laborers who have come late to our work. If we look at life this way, our hearts will be filled with gratitude and love for God with no room for envy and resentment of others. And we will cheerfully labor in God’s vineyard and be glad of the company of others who come to work, at any time of the day. If we look at life this way, with full hearts, we will be free to cry out, “It’s not fair! Thank you, God! Thank you!” Amen.