

**Sept. 20, 2020
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 16
Matthew 20:1-16**

The parable that Jesus tells in today's gospel reading raises questions of fairness, justice, and equity. It is a familiar story; Jesus says that a certain landowner goes out at daybreak and finds some workers to pull weeds and pick grapes in his vineyard, and he hires them. Just happy to have a job for the day, the workers begin their task. But at mid-morning, more workers show up, and at noon more workers come, and then, just an hour before quitting time, workers are still streaming into the vineyard.

Then, Jesus tells us, they line up to receive their pay; those who were last to be hired were at the front of the line and, to the surprise of nearly everyone, they received a full day's pay. I am pretty sure that those who worked the longest began to rub their hands together in excitement: "Oh boy, if they're getting a hundred shekels, what are we going to get? Thousands maybe! This is a great gig!" But when they reached the front of the line, they discovered that every worker received exactly the same wage. Whether they worked one hour or twelve, the pay was still the same; 100 shekels.

"It's not fair!" they cried. "We worked harder and longer! It's not fair; we earned more!" And, in a sense, they were right. If they were being paid for the hours worked, or the tasks accomplished, the full day workers deserved more than the one-hour workers. No employer in her right mind would try this sort of thing today. They would be inundated by union officials, lawyers, and job seekers. No school teacher would give "A's" to the student who wrote a one page essay and the student who wrote a book. An

athlete who shows up for the last five minutes of practice and still gets to start in the game would never work.

None of these circumstances would be acceptable in this structured, reasoned world of ours. But this parable that Jesus tells is not about how the world works ... it's about how the kingdom of God works. In fact, if you listened to the reading, that's how Jesus begins the parable: "The kingdom of heaven," he says, "is like the landowner who went to hire workers for his vineyard..."

In Jesus' day, many Jews would not pronounce or write the word for "God." It was too holy. Some Orthodox Jews today will not write or pronounce the word "God" because it is so sacred. Our gospel writer, Matthew, preferred to avoid the word for similar reasons. So, whereas other gospel writers use the term, "Kingdom of *God*," Matthew uses the term, "Kingdom of *Heaven*." And so his parable begins, "In the kingdom of *heaven* is like the landowner who went to hire workers for his vineyard..." And, because Matthew was the gospel most commonly read in churches down throughout the centuries, Christians have heard "Kingdom of Heaven" so much that they assume that Jesus was talking about an afterlife. But he wasn't. He was talking about the Kingdom of God on this earth here and now.

So, when we unpack this parable of the workers in the vineyard, what does Jesus teach us about the kingdom of God? Three things, I think. Three truths about how God looks at us, compared to how we look at each other.

The first truth is that the kingdom of God (here and now) is for everyone. Each time the landowner went to the marketplace to find laborers, whomever he saw he hired. Did you notice that? He didn't reject anyone. The owner of the vineyard didn't do any racial profiling. He did not say, "Well, you don't look like the type of person I want in my vineyard." The

owner didn't say, "Well, if you can't work twelve hours, or if you don't have excellent gardening skills, or if you have a physical or a mental disability you will be excluded." He hired everyone.

The second truth taught by this parable is that the workers were called to work, not just sit in the back row with Jesus. Working in a vineyard certainly must have been hard work; lots of bending, lots of reaching, lots of sun, heat, and cold. Those people in the parable were not invited by the landowner to sit in the shade and watch the work of others; they were called to work. And so are we.

The third truth revealed in this parable is one that is characteristically biblical. The workers did not earn their pay by how many hours they worked. They didn't earn their wage by how many bushels of grapes they picked. If they had – if their reward was based on work done – then the landowner should have rewarded each of them individually for what they had accomplished. But no, they trusted the landowner's word, and they followed him to the vineyard. And when payday came, the owner made good on his promise. In the same way, we do not gain the kingdom of heaven by the good works we do in this world. We gain the kingdom by heeding the call of the landowner to follow. The workers were not treated fairly or justly by the standards of *this* world. They were treated graciously by the master of a kingdom who gives everyone more than they actually deserve.

I will close with an illustration from a Special Olympics held a few years ago in Atlanta. In the 100 yard dash, ten-year-old boys and girls lined up to start the race. When the gun sounded, they bolted. But after only a few strides one of the girls went down. The boy in the next lane glanced at her on the ground, and then he did a surprising thing; He stopped and helped her to her feet. Another racer also stopped to help. And then another, and another. Pretty soon all eight athletes – special athletes in every way – stopped to help

the fallen runner. Then they walked, arm in arm, across the finish line together. Stunned spectators and proud parents, all with tears flowing, watched as all of the racers received the same prize: first place.

In the kingdom, I think that describes the Body of Christ. We are not competitors, nor are we adversaries. We are workers together in the kingdom of God. The work, itself, is the reward. Picking the grapes *is* the pay. And when life in this vineyard comes to an end, God has a feast in her kingdom which goes on eternally and serving the most wonderful wine from the very best grapes picked by the most faithful workers.

Amen