

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 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?' They said to him, "Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard.' 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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, 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.' 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? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

“God’s Grace: a total departure from conventional wisdom”

The people who the vineyard owner hired lived life day to day. They stood in the town square hoping to be hired every single morning. Jesus tells his disciples a parable pitting day laborer against day laborer. He rebukes one group of day laborer’s grumblings because another group got 11 hours worth of free wages. Is that fair? Day laborers don’t exactly have the luxury of being long-term thinkers and dreamers. They are too busy hoping for a day job that will allow them to feed themselves and their families that night. Of course the first workers hired hoped the manager would pay them more after they saw that those who had only worked an hour received the full day’s wage. The first group worked the longest in the hot sun and would probably need to eat more food that night so they could gain enough strength to work the next day. We sympathize with their reaction. They saw others receiving grace and mercy, yet what they got was simply just. No more. We shake our heads and are tempted to call Jesus out as insensitive to the realities of the world.

First last, last first. This is no way for an owner to run a profitable business. This owner is extravagant, not fair. From now on all the day laborers might decide to hold out on being hired by this owner till the end of the day. A precedent has been set! “These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (v. 12). Conventional wisdom tells them and us that order has been broken. Our sense of equity for all is shaken.

What kind of owner leaves the vineyard six times in one day anyways? Surely this is flagrant behavior. People loaf around and take long breaks while the owner gallivants off on those trips to town. It is our own voice we hear in one of the first labor’s complaint. Some workers have received unmerited wages!

This parable makes no sense when viewed under the lens of our conventional sensibilities. When viewed from a literal perspective we see cold facts. Some received what was just—a day’s wage for a day’s worth of work. Others received grace—and were given what they had not earned. But, perhaps we are too speedy to say that God is simply just to the early crew. Parables after all are not meant to be taken literally. They point to truth about God and usually turn our worldviews upside down.

Is it true that the first received only what was just?

The beginning and end of this parable provide clues for a different reading. Jesus just explained to his disciples, who are last by worldly standards, that they will be first with him at the renewal of all things. But even among the last, who will be first, God’s grace is still a scandal that Jesus relays. “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out...” (v. 1a)

Imagine now the beauty of a large vineyard with a bumper crop on a hot harvest day. The sun is shining warmly upon the vines and the people working. Grape vines are magnificently weighed down by the bounty upon them because there has been the perfect amount of warmth and rain during the year. With great satisfaction the owner surveys the scene and realizes she’ll need extra help to get the harvest in. What a problem to have! Everyone in the household depending on the harvest for their livelihood can breathe a sign of relief. But others, those with no land have no such safety net. They survive day by day, getting no more than temporary relief. The owner knows this and is compelled to keep going back getting more and more laborers until all in the square have been hired. It is possible the landowner came in grace to every day laborer in the first place!

Who are the laborers in this reading? They are those who need grace, mercy, and justice on a continual basis. We all are day laborers. I don’t know that it matters which hired group we might want to associate ourselves with. The first, somewhere in the middle, or the last. Every group was brought in by a gracious owner who knows their needs and promised to pay what is fair and right. Every group stood in need out there on that square each day. Like the first group we often stand in need of hearing these words, “FRIEND, I am doing you no wrong...take what belongs to you and go; I choose...” (vs. 13-14). We often feel wronged instead of blessed. It kills us when others get what we think we need. But the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out and hired all day long. God does this out of perpetual grace and generosity.

God is gracious because God is loving community within God’s self. God is no system manager or cost analyst when it comes to grace. God’s mercy is given over and over to us and we do not deserve it whether we are the first to be hired or the last.

The Manager seems to come from the same perspective! The Landowner graciously went out and brought more and more in while the Manager made the executive decision to pay them all the same wage after being told to begin with the last. That Manager was intuitively in sync with will of the Owner.

All who are brought into the kingdom of heaven are brought in through grace. No merit system or work ethic will secure our entrance. So in the here and now, what might the knowledge of grace mean to the first ones hired, the ones who know their place is secure for this day? Let’s say the first ones hired have been disciples of Jesus their whole lives, working for God’s glory. When others are brought into the vineyard through the same grace and seem to receive more for less work, can the first batch celebrate God’s generosity instead of grumbling? I believe they can when intentional about it.

St. Michael's Episcopal Church down the street held a pig roast for the whole community. It wasn't a fundraiser or a mission event. It was simply a joyful feast open to all. Why did they do this? Their Priest told me it was because they know God loves them and they want to share their joy with others. Their pig roast is a testimony to celebration of God's amazing work in Jesus Christ. They want to be hospitable to strangers!

Celebration in light of what God has done is the antithesis of grumbling over what we feel we are lacking. I believe there are more ways than we can imagine for this congregation to paint our communal life red with joy, expressing to others what we've been given. Good News! Our individual and corporate call is to emulate the Landowner's generosity. May we let the good news we know speak through our lives and welcome all the grace God bestows on others. Amen.