

### I

When I was about 11 or 12 years old, I was offered a job in our local youth sports league as a game clock operator. I still remember my first paycheck. I had worked 10 basketball games over the course of two Saturdays, and there in the mail was an envelope with my name on it, and inside was a check in the amount of \$22.50. I was rich!

### II

Just about all of us can recall our first job – not just the setting or the work involved, discovering the direct relationship between time and effort and reward. Most of us, I think, teach our children that there is value and dignity and even joy in work, that there is something satisfying about doing an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. It's a value that's deeply ingrained in us from an early age, and it's reinforced regularly by the marketplaces in this world in which we all live and move and have our being.

All of which makes this story from the gospel of Matthew in which Jesus teaches his disciples a parable about laborers and a certain vineyard all the more troubling.

### III

If you've been worshiping with us this winter, you know that we've been reading and preaching our way through the Gospel of Matthew. We've been following along as Jesus has been making his way through villages and towns, and we noted two weeks ago that

there's now been a change in destination. Jesus is headed south – toward Jerusalem, and already he's spoken openly with his disciples about what will happen when they get there – namely that he will be handed over and killed, and three days later, he will be raised again.

And as they're making their way toward Jerusalem, Jesus has been teaching them using in parables – short, fictional stories that illustrate a larger truth. And today, as the journey toward Jerusalem continues, Jesus teaches a parable about laborers and a certain vineyard. So listen now for a Word from God from the Gospel of Matthew, beginning at chapter 20, verse 1.

*“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.”*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

I think most of us have a deep, ingrained sense of the relationship between effort and reward. But this parable does not follow that logic. Those who were hired at the end of the day get the same wages as those who were hired at dawn, and I don’t know about you, but at first read, it makes me anxious.

But before we dismiss it outright, let’s dig a little deeper and note some of the details. Like most parables, it begins with an ordinary scene, one that has played out in every economy in the world throughout history. There is a

need for labor, and a need for wages, and so a marketplace has been created where supply and demand are met. Even right here in our own community, just outside the entrance to the Home Depot on Epps Bridge Road, you will find such a marketplace.

And so the landowner who needs labor goes to the marketplace, and he finds laborers in need of wages, and a bargain is struck – a day’s work for a day’s pay – a scene that plays out all over the world every day.

But then things get to be a bit strange. The landowner goes back to the marketplace a few hours later, and he discovers that there is still a supply of workers. So the landowner makes them an offer, although it’s slightly different terms than those offered at dawn. The landowner simply promises to pay this group, “Whatever is right.”

And the pattern repeats itself. The landowner goes to the marketplace at noon, and again at three. In each case, the landowner promises to pay them “whatever is right.”

And then at 5:00, in the last hour of the day, the landowner returns to the marketplace, and discovers that the supply of laborers has not been exhausted. And incredulous, the landowner says, “Why are you standing here idle all day?”

And they answer with the obvious truth. “Because no one has hired us.” The landowner says to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” And there is no

discussion at all of a pay rate with these folks who are still looking for work so late in the day.

And we might wonder, “Why didn’t all of these workers bargain with the landowner? Even at the last hour, they still should have secured an agreement about the pay rate.”

Maybe they were naive. Maybe they were lazy. Maybe they lacked street smarts.

Or maybe, these who were still left in the marketplace at the end of the day, knew from long, painful experience that they were in no position to bargain. Why are you standing here idle all day? Because no one has hired us.

They remembered painful lessons from their childhoods, like when it came time for choosing up teams for a game, and the biggest and the strongest and the fastest kids always got picked first, and the smallest and the weakest and the slowest kids always got picked last. After all, that’s just the way it is in the marketplace – both then and now.

Maybe they didn’t negotiate because they knew they were lucky to be offered any work at all. Maybe they didn’t negotiate because they knew that being paid whatever the landowner deemed was right was better than not being paid at all.

And, as the daylight was almost gone, the time came to settle up with the workers. And so the landowner gave instructions to the foreman to line

everyone up for payday in reverse order of the time they had been hired.

And so those who had been hired at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, those who were the weakest, the oldest, the smallest, the ones who no one else had hired, lined up first. And then those who came on at 3, and then those at noon, and those at 9, and then, at the end, the ones who had been hired first – the ones with the strongest backs and biggest muscles and most obvious natural competitive advantages.

And then the manager began to dole out the pay. And can you imagine the surprise, the delight, the barely contained joy, when those for whom the market economy had no use, those whom everyone else had rejected out of hand, those who hadn’t even bothered to discuss the subject of wages because they were so glad to have work, even for an hour, received a full day’s pay. There is value and dignity in work, to be sure. I wonder how long it had been since they had had received any wages at all? Imagine their joy and surprise and delight when they discovered the generosity of the landowner.

Now, down at the other end of the pay line, those who had been hired by dawn’s early light, those who had agreed with the landowner at dawn for a day’s work for a day’s wages, saw what had transpired with those who had been hired at the eleventh hour, and they made an assumption that they would receive more than what they had

originally agreed upon at the start of the day.

And their assumption was not an unreasonable one. After all, the marketplace teaches us that there is a relationship between effort and reward. The marketplace teaches us that that over time, the market will naturally select those who can give the most effort and who can produce the most value, so all must learn to compete if they wish have wages. We know these laws of the marketplace well. We live by them and we teach them to our children.

But here again is where this parable that Jesus teaches gets strange. Because in the parable, the landowner blatantly defies the laws of the marketplace. In the parable, those who are at a competitive disadvantage, those who are old and weak and slow, those whom the laws of the marketplace have naturally selected as unworthy of wages, nevertheless receive a full day's wage. Not only that, but when it comes time for payday, those whom the marketplace has declared to be the last of all and least of all are the first in line.

In the parable, the laws of the marketplace are turned completely upside down. And those who had been hired last rejoice. But those who were hired first grumble against the landowner.

But notice their complaint. They are not vocally upset that their assumption about the pay scale proved to be incorrect. Listen to how they tell

on themselves. "These last ... you have made them equal to us."

To be sure, the landowner did not cheat those who were hired at dawn. The offer was a day's pay for a day's work, and at the end of the day, the agreement has been satisfied. The complaint of those hired first is that the landowner has not followed the rules of the marketplace, and consequently, in their own words, "You have made them equal to us."

But this is not a parable about the marketplace. This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven.

And in the kingdom of heaven, the landowner's chief concern is not about the production of the vineyard. In the kingdom of heaven, the chief concern of the landowner is the wellbeing of the people, especially those people whom the marketplace has deemed unworthy of entry into the vineyard.

In the kingdom of heaven, Jesus seems to say, is that people are valued not because of what they can do, not because of what they can produce, but simply because they are. In the kingdom of heaven, there is grace and mercy and joy, because the landowner is generous.

In the kingdom of heaven, everyone gets paid, which means everyone eats, both those at the front of the line and those at the end. In the kingdom of heaven, there's enough daily

bread to go around for those hired at dawn, and those hired at dusk.

And when those who were hired at dawn grumble against the landowner and say, “You have made them equal to us,” the landowner says, “Yes, I have. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” Thanks be to God, the kingdom of heaven is not governed by the laws of the marketplace. The kingdom of heaven is governed by a generous landowner.

#### IV

But let’s talk about you, my friend. My friend, God is crazy about you. God’s love for you is wider and deeper and stronger than you or I could ever imagine.

Whether you’re the kind of person who gets hired at dawn, or at 9, or at noon, or at 3, or whether you’re the kind of person who when 5:00 rolls around is still standing in the marketplace because no one has hired you, you are worthy of the vineyard.

You are worthy of the vineyard, my friend, but not because of what you can produce. You are worthy of the vineyard, you are loved, you are cherished by the landowner, but not because of anything you’ve accomplished. You are worthy of the vineyard, my friend, you are loved, you are cherished, but not because of anything you’ve said or not said, and not because of anything you’ve done or not done. You are worthy of the vineyard

because the extravagantly generous landowner has declared it to be so.

#### V

But of course, we do not find ourselves in the marketplace or in the vineyard alone.

And it’s our natural human tendency, developed over thousands of years of human history, to instantly take an account of our fellow workers. Without even being conscious of it, when we encounter another human being, whether in the marketplace or in the vineyard or in the workplace or in the classroom or in the church, we immediately observe all kinds of things about them. We observe their age, the clothes they wear, their body size, the color of their skin, the texture of their hair, the shape of their eyes, the clothes they wear, and the list goes on.

And without even thinking about it, we mentally apply the laws of the marketplace based upon those observations. We decide whether the worker we have observed is worthy of entry into the vineyard at dawn or at 9 or at noon or at 3 or at 5, and, if we’re honest with ourselves, we decide that some are not worthy of the vineyard at all. We decide who should be first, and who should be last, as the marketplace has taught us to do from time immemorial.

And then along comes Jesus telling us this parable about the kingdom of heaven that messes with all

of our notions about who is deserving and who is not.

It shouldn't be lost on us, friends, that Jesus teaches this parable while he and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus knows that he will be handed over and killed, perhaps for saying things just like this, for challenging the logic of the marketplace, for challenging all of our human assumptions about who among us is in and who is out, who is on top and who is on bottom.

But this same Jesus also invites us to come to his table.

At his table, all are welcome, regardless of whether they arrived at dawn or at dusk.

At his table, all receive their daily bread, regardless of ability or effort.

At his table, we are welcomed and fed by the generous landowner, and then we are sent out to feed and to serve and to practice generosity in his name.

At his table, we receive a foretaste, a glimpse, of the kingdom of heaven where there is work, and dignity, and bread enough for everyone.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.