

The Last Will Be First

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, in Albuquerque,
on September 20, 2020.

Matthew 20:1-16

In this morning's reading from Matthew, Jesus tells a story about day laborers. The setting he describes is surprisingly similar to scenes we have seen in our own day – groups of people (usually men of different ages) hanging out on a street corner or in a parking lot early in the morning hoping that someone will come along in a truck or a van and hire them for the day. The work may be agricultural as in Jesus' story, or it might be digging ditches, doing construction, landscaping, or helping someone move.

In Jesus' story, a landowner is looking for laborers to work in his vineyard. And I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say that it is probably harvest time in the vineyard. After all, the owner of the vineyard goes looking for day laborers five times through the day: early in the morning, then at 9 o'clock, then again around 12 noon, and again at about 3 o'clock, and finally at 5 o'clock (just an hour before quitting time).

It would appear that this grape grower needs every farm worker he can possibly find. The more hired hands he has picking grapes, the faster the harvest will be brought in.

The workers he hires first thing in the morning he agrees to pay the usual daily wage -- a denarius. It wasn't much. It was barely enough for a family to subsist on. But these poor, landless peasants, who hired themselves out by the day, didn't have many options. They felt lucky to get work at all. And as a denarius was the going rate for a day's work, they agreed upon it.

As for the other workers who were hired later in the day, the landowner said that he would pay them "whatever is right." They didn't settle on a particular amount. Most people hearing the parable for the first time would probably assume that their compensation would be prorated according to the hours worked. If a denarius was the going rate for a full day's work, then it would only be fair for those workers who worked less than a day to be paid less than a denarius.

We are surprised, therefore, as are the workers in the parable, when those last hired are paid first and receive a full day's wage – a whole denarius -- for only one hour of work!

The workers who were hired first are eventually paid last. They have had to wait and watch while everyone else was paid. And everyone else was paid a full day's wage even though they had worked less than a full day. As you might imagine, these workers who were hired first, who worked the entire day in the scorching heat, thought they might be paid more than a denarius for their day's labor. After all, they had seen everyone else receive more pay than they were due for the hours they had worked. Shouldn't the hardest workers, those who worked the longest, receive more than their due as well?

When it finally comes to their turn to be paid, they are given the usual day's wage -- one denarius -- no more. The workers grumble against the landowner: "That's not fair! We

worked all day in the scorching heat, and those you hired at 5 o'clock tonight worked for only an hour! Yet you're paying us the same amount -- one denarius? It's not right!"

I can identify with these workers who were hired first and worked all day but received only the one denarius that was initially agreed upon – no more than the other laborers, who worked fewer hours. I imagine many of you can identify with them as well. We were raised to value hard work and to expect just compensation for that work. The Protestant work ethic is deeply ingrained in us. So, we are indignant that someone who worked all day would receive the same compensation as someone who worked only an hour. It doesn't seem fair. It doesn't seem just.

After all, we believe in equal pay for equal work (though we know that in our society men still receive higher compensation than women for the same work, and White men still receive higher compensation than Black and Hispanic men for the same work).

If we were to identify with those who were hired later in the day, we probably would have a very different reaction to the story. Rather than grumbling about being treated unfairly, we would probably be filled with joy and gratitude, astounded that we had still received a whole denarius even though we had worked less than a full day! We'd be singing the landowner's praises for his enormous generosity! We would feel like we'd won the jackpot.

Let's think a little more about day laborers for a moment. Who gets hired first, and who gets hired last, if at all? Those hired first presumably are the strong, the young, the healthy, the able-bodied. Those hired last are likely to be the weak, the old, the sick, the disabled. They are the poorest of the poor, the marginalized of society, those Jesus later refers to as "the least of these" in chapter 25 of Matthew.

By paying all the laborers the same daily wage no matter how many hours they worked, the landowner in Jesus' story honors the contractual agreement he had with those hired first and shows compassion for those hired later (the weak, the old, the sick, the disabled, the marginalized, "the least of these"). The landowner puts the last first and the first last, and in so doing, demonstrates what liberation theologians call a "preferential option for the poor."

Just imagine how different our world would look if "the last" were given first priority and "the first" were put last! The homeless would have housing. The hungry would be fed. The sick would receive health care. Sexism and racism would be no more.

Jesus' parable is intended to tell us something about the reign of God. Remember how the passage begins? "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Jesus' story is meant to tell us how things work in God's realm, and by extension, how we pray things would work in our world.

In the economics of God's realm there is full employment. No one need stand idle without work to do. There is a job for everyone! We are all called to ministry of one sort or another. God calls all of us to be laborers in his vineyard, workers in his fields, servants in his kingdom, no matter what our skills and abilities are. God's call is persistent. God keeps calling us over and over again. "Come, work with me. Come, be part of my plan. Come and help me transform the world. Come with your faith. Come with your doubts. Come as you are. Just come." God's "Help Wanted" sign is always up.

God's call is inclusive. God's call goes out to everyone. God is an equal opportunity employer. We are all invited to work in God's vineyard.

And it's never too late to respond to God's call. There's no deadline. It's never too late to say "Yes" to God's invitation. It's never too late to go to work in God's vineyard. God wants your help whether you are 9 years old or 90 years old. God's job offer is always on the table.

What's more, in the economics of God's realm, compensation is based not on merit, not on seniority, but on need. It doesn't matter whether you've worked all day or just for an hour. God pays a denarius -- enough to get by for that day -- a living wage. People are to contribute to society according to their abilities and consume from society according to their needs. That idea may sound like communism, and indeed, it was popularized by Karl Marx in the late nineteenth century. But the idea existed long before Marx -- in the teachings of Jesus and the practice of the first-century Christian community.

It doesn't matter whether you've been laboring in God's vineyard for your whole life or it's your first day on the job. The benefits are the same. You receive God's unconditional love, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the support and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So, if you aren't already working in God's vineyard, consider accepting God's generous offer today. There's plenty of work to be done. And God longs for you to be a part of that work, part of God's plan for transforming the world. Amen.