

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. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When 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.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

“The last shall be first, and the first will be last,” Jesus says. He says this repeatedly throughout the gospels, but our reading today is the clearest illustration of what he might have meant by it.

The Parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner only shows up in the gospel of Matthew —not any of the other gospels—and so we only hear it once every three years here in church. It comes around but once in a while and so it is worthy of our close attention.

Hear it again, from a different perspective:

I was standing in the marketplace. You know, over by the stand where they sell the wood and the clay. It was me and a bunch of other people, jockeying for the few clean places to sit. Taking turns eating breakfast and waiting for the sun to come up. Hoping that there'd be work, and soon. Lunch doesn't buy itself, ya know.

And then he came by, the guy who owns that vineyard down the road. He came up to a bunch of us and said he'd pay us to work the day, harvesting grapes on the hillside of his farm.

The pay was good, so we agreed and piled into the back of this pickup truck, and he drove us out to the place where we were gonna be working that day.

When we got there the sun was just cresting the mountain and the light made the most beautiful, playful shapes on the landscape.

The dew glistened on the grapes.

The air was crisp.

Mmm! I love working early in the morning.

After about an hour though it was clear that there was more vineyard than our little crew could handle on our own. I mean, we were doing fine, but time was flying, and there were acres left to harvest.

And so, about 9:30, the vineyard owner showed up with some more folks to do the field work. Too bad for them they missed that amazing sunrise. Whatever. They joined us, a few rows down the line and I guess we were pretty happy to have the extra help...

But you know, that vineyard owner must have really wanted all the harvesting done that day, because he just kept on bringing in more people.

By lunchtime the work crew had doubled, and by the afternoon it had tripled in size.

There were a whole bunch of us out there working in the high heat of the day. And thank goodness, because there was plenty to do, and some of us were getting tired out.

Around 5:30 we noticed another truck full of workers pull up. They got dropped off all the way at the bottom of the hill, down by the vineyard shop and tasting room. Down by the last few rows of grapes.

I mean, I guess we did need the extra hands for the final push, but I think we could have handled it. There was only about an hour's worth of work left to do. But, okay. Whatever.

Sweaty, and tired, me and my crew finished out the day and walked down the hill to the manager's office, in the shop by the tasting room, to collect our pay. A fair wage for a long, hard day of labor...

But would you believe that when we got there those jokers from the last shift were up at the front of the line?

Honestly, the nerve of some people. I mean, these people had just sat around at the marketplace for most of the day—they didn't even have *dirt* on them. But, oh, sure, go ahead. Whatever.

Yeah, they're up there, getting cashed out at the same rate me and my crew were supposed to get paid. In fact, that's what everyone was getting!

As the line got shorter me and my crew started noticing that there was just one wage being handed out to everyone—even the afternoon and evening shifts!

Everyone got the same chunk of cash, and a nice glass of wine to boot.

I mean, I'd been looking forward to that money and that glass of wine all day long, but I gotta tell ya. Now I'm angry.

Here I've been busting my butt since before the sun woke up and I'm supposed to just stand around and *socialize* with these people who didn't work half as hard as me?

Literally, not a fraction as hard.

These people who just, swooped in at the last minute, picked a few grapes, and called it a day? *These people*. I mean. Did they even break a sweat? I doubt it.

So you *know* I marched right up to the dude who owns the vineyard, and I let him have it.

He was in a crowd of the fieldworkers, laughing with them and sipping on some wine. I don't care. He's gonna hear me out and now.

What kind of business is he running, ya know? Paying everyone on the crew the same, even though some of us worked a full day and some just a few minutes. It's not smart, man. And it's not *fair*.

It was loud in the tasting room, because everyone else was enjoying happy hour—catching up with each other about their families and lives and stuff—so the vineyard owner and I went out back.

We stood at the foot of that gorgeous hill—the one I’d become so familiar with over the course of the day—and I told him. I said, dude this really stinks. This isn’t fair, you paying us all the same. I worked harder and longer than any of those jokers in there.

I was really upset. I don’t even remember the details of what I said, but I sure said it. But then the vineyard owner stopped me.

He was still smiling the satisfied smile of a man who had accomplished his goals for the day. A comfortable, easy smile. He clapped me on the back and asked, directly, with a hint of concern, “you got paid, right?”

And I said yeah.

“Huh. You got paid exactly what we agreed on, right?”

And I said yeah.

“Huh. And it’s a good wage for all the work you did today, isn’t it?”

And I said yeah.

“And were you treated okay by my managers? And you had enough help?”

And I said yeah.

And then the vineyard owner looked at me and asked, “so what’s the problem, friend?

Why aren’t you in the tasting room, enjoying happy hour with everyone else?”

I looked into the building through the large windows at the group of laborers—all from different shifts—all standing around, talking to each other. I could hear their muffled conversations and laughter.

I could see them in there. Happy. Each of them, compensated for their labor. Some, more so than they could have hoped for. More than makes any kind of sense.

Everyone in there was satisfied and grateful after having found work that day, and able now to go home and feed their families.

It's a specific kind of contentment, the kind they were wearing. And I watched them. And I watched the vineyard owner watching them. So proud.

And then he clapped me on the back again and said, “friend, come in and have a glass of wine with us, if you want. Or leave, with your pay. Your choice.”

It's easy to identify with the early morning, all-day laborer, isn't it? He's outraged, because the vineyard owner pays everyone on the crew the same, living wage, even though *he believes* he has worked harder than any of them.

That's *not* fair. And it *wouldn't* make a whole lotta business sense. The disgruntled laborer, from his perspective, sort of has a point.

In religious terms, it's like someone who's gone to church every Sunday of every week of their entire life, being told that God loves them to eternity and back. Being told that they're heavenly home is safe and secure. Being told, "well done, good and faithful servant"...

...And then overhearing that same thing being said to someone who just yesterday was being critical of people who go to church. Someone who's faith is new and fragile and untested. They, too, will be sipping wine in the kingdom of heaven. They, too, have received the same divine love.

Well—it's easy to think—"that's unfair. They didn't *earn* that. *I* earned that!" Right?

And *this*, friends, is the scandal of the parable of the generous vineyard owner. *This* is the scandal of the gospel. The heart of Jesus' message to us all: *God isn't interested in what's fair.*

God is interested in providing for the needs of God's people. All of them. All of us.

Providing work and purpose. An invitation to everyone to get our hands a little dirty. To tend to creation and to one another, and to feel satisfied at the end of the day.

God isn't interested in what's *fair*. God is interested providing for the needs of God's people, each as we have need.

God is interested in love. In grace. In inclusion. In *justice*. In divinely *living wages* for all people. And God gives these out lavishly. Like water in a rainforest, or sand in a desert, or wine at a vineyard.

God gives with such ease we can't even begin to understand it.

God gives eternal life to the deserving and undeserving, both. Mercy and forgiveness to all who have need of it.

Which is to say, *all of us*.

God flings *wide* the doors of heaven, because regardless of our outrage, God wants *everyone* at the party. Everyone. Including you.

The challenge for us this morning is to set aside that disgruntled, nagging voice of envy, of *unnecessary rivalry*. That voice which compares *our* blessings with the blessings of *others*. The one that keeps us from enjoying the party God is throwing because we're too busy checking the guest list. The voice which tells us to get more,

get ahead. To beat out the competition. The one that says we're better than *them*.

Whoever *them* is.

That voice is strong, and it makes itself known in insidious ways, like classism, racism, anti-semitism, Islamophobia, nationalism, exceptionalism, ableism, agism. All of our posturing, judging, and unhelpful measuring of righteousness—these too, come from this voice.

Any creeping feeling that we are somehow more righteous or more deserving of God's love and blessing than someone else—that voice that whispers sin in our ears.

That voice is not of God, and it is a lie. And it will only serve to keep us standing at the base of a gorgeous hill at the end of a long day, like the disgruntled laborer before us. Looking in on a happy hour party that our pride—and that sin—keeps us from enjoying.

Looking in at all those we've critiqued instead of loved.

Looking in from the outside at those we've othered and ostracized and elevated ourselves away from, only to realize that it is we who are missing out on the all the fun.

Biblical scholar Robert Farrar Capon rewrote the end of the parable from the perspective of the vineyard owner—from the perspective of God. In his version, God says:

“All I did was have a fun idea. I decided to put the last first and the first last to show you there are no insiders or outsiders here: when I’m happy, *everybody’s* happy, no matter what they did or didn’t do.

I’m not asking you to like me for it, I’m telling you to *enjoy* me. If you want to mope, that’s your business. But since the only thing it’ll get you is a lousy disposition, why don’t you just go into the tasting room and have a nice glass of chardonnay? The choice is up to you, friend.”

At the end of the day, I want to be *at* the party God is throwing—I don’t want to miss a moment of it. I want to invite others to *join* me there.

At the end of the day, I want to be surrounded by all sorts of grateful people who have received the same incredible *gift* as me—freely given and *all* undeserved—and not worry for one second about how or why *they* got it.

The conversation we’ll have will be pure grace. The wine will be eternity. The company will be love. The tasting room will be justice. And it *will* be for *all* people.

Such is the vineyard owner's deepest desire:

Not fairness, friends. But that all people would be gathered together from the ends of the earth, that they would each be satisfied *according to their need*, and that they would have cause to laugh, together.

It is a scandalous, beautiful vision, the one we're given in today's parable. A vision of God's unconditional generosity, and an invitation to be a little more generous in how we see the world.

A little more graceful in how we see each other, and ourselves.

A little more grateful for the gift our vineyard owner has given to each of us, each day. And more ready to insist that that wealth be shared as widely as possible. So that all might know they've been invited to taste and see the kingdom of God.

Right here. Right now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.