

A Sermon for the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 20, 2020  
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*Jesus said, "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." Matthew 20:1-16*

When you were growing up, do you remember what would happen if someone butted in line? There was an unwritten rule and everyone knew it and when the breach occurred you heard everyone shout out in unison – no butting in line!

We carry this rule on into adulthood, don't we? It resurfaces when we are in traffic that needs to merge as a lane narrows. It happens in the grocery store, too. You know, when you are in a hurry and get in the checkout lane and you have chosen the wrong lane. I almost always choose the wrong lane. It's time for the cashier to go on break, there's a missing barcode, or a credit card that won't work. As I wait I notice all the other lanes are moving faster and this makes me more impatient. Then, someone comes up behind me in line, and that is exactly when the manager has an employee open a new lane. Right next to me. And while I stand there trapped, three other people charge their baskets into this new lane. *They* have not waited for 15 minutes already. *They* have not had to work hard at being patient and forgiving. *They* don't have to wait at all, and they breeze right through the checkout lane as I stand there and watch, while my ice cream slowly melts. I ask you, is that fair?

From the time we are old enough to stand in a line, there is something inside of us that cannot abide the thought of someone butting in line in front of us. It's just not fair. If you want to know what's fair, you can ask a preschooler – they will be happy to let you know! We are born wanting everything to be fair. But life is not fair. Things happen in life that challenge our assumptions over and over. Even so, we keep trying to make things fair, and by that I mean, we want things to be fair *for us*; we keep trying to control the outcome, to take charge of the situation, to make sure that we get what we deserve. We are offended when someone else gets something and we do not, or if they get something we don't think they deserve.

This is what we encounter in today's Gospel, and what we heard should make us all a little uncomfortable. Living as we do in a society that is all about getting ahead, finishing first, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps (which, may I point out, is a phrase found nowhere in scripture), Jesus tells a parable about what the kingdom of heaven is like. While it may not sound like good news to those of us at the front of the line, it is an answer to prayer to those of us at the back of the line. It's all a matter of perspective, isn't it? As we hear the story, it doesn't sound fair at all. Is it fair that those who work the longest are not rewarded for their extra labor? Our gut response is no! It is not fair!

Let's look more closely at this parable of the kingdom of heaven. Let's think about the way the vineyard owner keeps returning to the marketplace where the day laborers wait, and perhaps our sense of justice might shift. On his first trip to the marketplace, early in the morning, the landowner surely chose the strongest workers, the fastest, the fittest, possibly the most enthusiastic. When he returned for more workers each time, we can assume that he chose the best of those who were left.

When he returned at five o'clock, imagine who might be left at this point: maybe the elderly, the inexperienced, or those with physical limitations. Maybe some are just past that age to be considered for a career position (some of us are all too familiar with that scenario). Perhaps those left were people who would not have been able to survive an entire day of hard work in the field. But they still have the same needs, desires and aspirations of those chosen at the first part of the day: to provide for their family, to have a sense of worth, to build some financial security.

Perhaps it was not that they were lazy or undeserving, but that the randomness of life, the unfairness of life had created a situation in which they have been denied opportunity for generations. Perhaps the personal burdens they carried were already a full day's work. My friend's daughter, who is like my own child, is a single mother of two children ages 8 and 5. Right now she is trying to work from home while supervising online school for her children in a small apartment she shares with a friend. I cannot begin to imagine how this is for her. Maybe you know someone struggling like this?

In the parable, the owner of the vineyard paid all of the laborers the usual daily wage. All of them. The ones who were first in line, and the ones who were last in line were paid the same amount. Those who had worked all day in the hot sun grumbled against the owner's decision to give equally to all. The grumblers became the judges, deciding who was worthy based only on what they could see in the moment. But the owner of the vineyard could see the larger picture.

Not only could he see that there were some who were unable to work all day due to personal burdens, he could also see that the strongest workers could be weakened by entitlement, jealousy and envy. In reply to their grumbling about things not being fair, the vineyard owner said, "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?" Or literally, in the Greek: "Is your eye evil because I am good?" Those who worked all day were giving the stink eye to those who worked less, not appreciating God's generous grace for all.

Here's the thing about the landowner in this parable, here's the thing about God: when the workday is over, what concerns the landowner is not who deserves what. All he cares about is that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage. The capacity to go home and feed a family. Sufficient security and peace of mind to sleep well. A solid grasp on hope. A reliable sense of accomplishment, belonging, and dignity.

Being generous is the status quo in the kingdom of heaven. Our God is generous, and every person is valued and loved equally, whether they are first or last in line, whether they are able to work a 60 hour week or a 20 hour week, or not at all. Jesus revealed God's generosity in all that he did. caring for the poor, sick, hungry, and outcast wherever he encountered them.

At first, this parable sounds unfair, just as it did to those hearing it when Jesus first told it. But maybe it sounds unfair depending on where we are standing in the line. What if our main concern was for *everyone* to be first in line? Then this parable would be amazing; it would be really good news! What would it take for everyone to be first in line? It would take us having the mindset of God. In God's kingdom we are all first in line.

In God's kingdom all the checkout lanes are open and there are no calls for a price check, no credit cards that don't work, and there is no waiting! This kingdom begins to happen when we remember that sometimes life is not fair, that sometimes we are going to find ourselves last in line. The kingdom happens when we choose to help those who are dealing with the unfairness of life. It becomes visible when we stop judging those whose lives we really don't understand, when we let go of our assumptions, our grumbling, and our envy, realizing that if not for the love of God, we would all be at the end of the line. When the last are first and the first are last the line simply disappears and we will all find ourselves in the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.