

September 20, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² 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.'

¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."

Message: Day Labourers

The hardest summer job I ever had was my first one.

I was part of a field crew that picked strawberries.

I'd get picked up in a van at home just after dawn

– and those of you who've been to morning meetings with me,

know that I am not at my best first thing,

and teenaged Emily was no better.

Some days, if there wasn't much demand,

we'd be home again in a couple of hours...

...some days, it'd be six hours on hands and knees,

sun blazing down on our backs.

The field crews always got rows that had already been picked
by the pick-your-own customers,

and of course, we were paid by the basket;

\$1.25 for a four-litre basket, if memory serves.

As I got to be a quicker picker and on a good row,

I could do alright in an hour,

better than what minimum wage was

(back then).

So when I read this particular parable from the gospel of Matthew,

I have great sympathy for those dawn-to-dusk workers;
 if someone had joined our crew late,
 picked one basket,
 and been given as much as I earned on all my baskets,
 picking all day,
 well, the unfairness would have had me
 grumbling, too.

Jesus certainly had an interesting definition of a fair wage.
 Imagine the business owner's reaction to this parable.
 If wages are not directly related to hours worked,
 then how will I motivate my employees?
 And if I can't motivate my employees,
 how will I sell my product, serve my clients
 and turn a profit?

Or imagine the committed, diligent worker
 who puts in the long hours.
 Well, we don't really need to imagine that, do we,
 because Jesus describes him for us:
 "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."

It's just not fair...if that's the way it's going to be,
 why shouldn't we just sit on the beach or read a book all day,
 and punch in at 4 o'clock?
 If employers everywhere acted like this landowner,
 the world would quickly spin into chaos.
 With people like him running businesses,
 nothing would get done.

And the poor worker, who laboured all day in the hot sun,
 would feel like his boss was taking advantage of him
 or making a fool of him,
 while the ones who were hired late in the afternoon
 might be feeling like they got away with something.

We know, of course, that this is a parable, not a real landowner;
 and that it's a teaching story about the kingdom of heaven.
 God's kingdom is so different than our world
 that Jesus always had to use parables and stories
 to reveal bits and pieces of it at a time.

Here, the kingdom of heaven is like the landowner, this master of the house.

His vineyard seems to need a lot of work doing,
 since he keeps hiring more and more labourers, all day long.
 And at the end of the day,
 he demonstrates a
 peculiarly unfair generosity,
 in paying the same wage to all his labourers,
 beginning with the last to start work
 and ending with those
 who worked all day long.
 And so the last are first,
 and the first last.

The landowner and master of the house
 is usually thought to be God in this story,
 and the day labourers are ordinary people.
 The denarius
 – the wage for the day –
 we could identify as salvation
 or relationship with God, perhaps.

God has his own ideas about generosity,
 mostly to do with making sure everyone can experience that generosity,
 if they're willing to accept it.
 God's generosity
 when it comes to saving us
 is a great source of hope,
 if not for ourselves,
 then for those we care about
 and worry over.
 Like the thief crucified right next to Jesus,
 who only had to believe right then
 to be in heaven after he died,
 for those we love and pray for
 who come late or uncertainly to faith in God,
 those of us who struggle to follow Jesus...
 ...the last shall be first
 and the same wage paid regardless...
 ...it's a hopeful, comforting thought.

And as for the all-day, dawn-to-dusk field crew, well,
 I don't think resentment or grumbling would be our response

to late-comers to the faith.
 We're content, for the most part, to help God,
 to work for God,
 and to receive the wages
 of blessing and relationship
 that come from that work.

God is openhandedly generous,
 offering salvation to all,
 whether we turn up early or late in the day.
 But I wonder...
 ...does this economic model of salvation
 really capture Jesus' meaning in this parable?
 This idea that we are remunerated
 in some fashion for the work
 we do for God.

The attentive listener will have noticed
 that Jesus is never asked a question like,
 "how should I run my vineyard?"
 or "what kind of wage should I expect for a day's work?"
 or even "what will I get if I follow you?"
 Perhaps, then, this parable,
 and the point that Jesus is trying to make,
 isn't about fair wages
 or the length of a day of labour
 at all.

There's an interesting undercurrent to this parable
 that gets lost in the grumbling about unmerited generosity.

Even the workers hired first thing in the morning,
 the ones who later complain,
 rolled out of bed that morning unemployed.
 But the landowner finds them,
 and gives them work.

I imagine that they,
 just like those hired at the sixth hour and the ninth hour,
 were standing idle in the marketplace, too.
 Whatever they'd been doing the day before,
 well, it hadn't resulted in a steady job or a re-hire.

They had no real livelihood
until the landowner sought them out.

But by the end of the day,
they seem to have forgotten that.
Or maybe they were so used to being day labourers
that they didn't really understand
that their lives could be different.
What's clear is that come the end of the day,
they are thinking only in terms of reward,
of fair pay for hours worked...
...as if the work itself wasn't
the real reward.

Perhaps an economic model doesn't really apply here...
...or maybe it does,
except that the economy it models
is very different than the one those day labourers,
than we, are used to,
an economy based
on new and radical ideas
about work and worth.

What did prompt Jesus to teach this lesson?
Well, he'd been talking about
protecting women from being abandoned by their husbands;
about children being allowed to approach him;
about the difficulty a rich young man,
fond of his wealth,
might have in entering
the kingdom of heaven:

It'd be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom, said Jesus.
So who can enter the kingdom, asked his disciples;
what about us?

And then Jesus tells his parable,
about a landowner who seems to think that
the point is to hire people into his vineyard to work,
not get a full day's work out of all of them,
or pay a fair wage at the end of the day.

If we look at this parable as citizens of this world,
 then we see a classic economic exchange relationship,
 where both parties get something out of this:
 work for the landowner, and a wage for the labourers,
 however fair or unfair.

But we are citizens of heaven,
 even if we currently live abroad;
 and so we see it differently;
 we can see, with Jesus' help,
 that the landowner is not
 paying the day labourers for their help;
 the landowner is helping the day labourers.

The landowner walked into that marketplace,
 again and again, from dawn until dusk,
 sweeping up the idle, the lost,
 the directionless, the marginalized,
 bringing them into his vineyard
 and giving them purpose
 and a share in his meaningful work.

This sounds very like God now, doesn't it?
 Because that is exactly what God always does:
 he goes out, again and again,
 as long as it takes,
 turning more and more lives toward Him,
 gifting them – gifting us –
 with a share
 in his meaningful work
 of redeeming and healing
 creation.

The grumbling workers serve as
 both caution and encouragement,
 reminding us that it's neither
 the pay-out nor the hours clocked serving God that count.
 Neither wage nor years of service
 change our worth in the kingdom of heaven;
 the first shall be last and the last first...
 ...and maybe that is fair,
 because those late arrivals
 were lost longest
 of us all.

For those of us who are at work
– whether it's church work,
or our daily witness of Jesus in the world,
or growing in our faith through prayer, Bible study –

Whatever the work, however long ago we were welcomed into the vineyard,
it's worthwhile reflecting, from time to time,
on how we view that work:
as benefit *to* God or gift *from* God;
as endurance of scorching heat and aching muscles
for little profit,
or as abundant fulfillment
of what we were made to be and do.

Neither our worth nor our work
is measured in hours on the clock,
or baskets picked,
or miles of soil tilled.

God's purpose for us is to show others
what abundant life looks like,
what healing and redemption feel like,
what it means to be swept up
by God's boundless love into that new life.
That's a good day's work,
in the kingdom of heaven.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.