

Sermon: Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard  
September 18, 2011  
By Nancy H. Harten

Matthew 20:1-16

**The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**

<sup>1</sup> "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> He agreed to pay them a denarius<sup>[a]</sup> for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

<sup>3</sup> "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. <sup>4</sup> He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' <sup>5</sup> So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.<sup>6</sup> About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

<sup>7</sup> "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

<sup>8</sup> "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

<sup>9</sup> "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. <sup>12</sup> 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

<sup>13</sup> "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' <sup>14</sup> Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. <sup>15</sup> Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

<sup>16</sup> "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

When I looked at the lectionary choices for today's scripture lesson, there were 5 to choose from. I read all of them and after some thought I chose Matthew 20:1-16 which Romeo just read for us. I'm usually drawn to the New Testament options – it is more in my comfort zone. And it's about Jesus, love and forgiveness – all nice subjects. There were two NT choices for today and I opted for the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, which by the way only appears in the gospel of Matthew. And it occurred to me as I was thinking about what I would say, that the last time I preached, I preached on the Parable of the Weeds. Two parables in a row for me was not intentional. I just happened to favor Matthew's lesson over the others. I think it's because I love a good story that has lots of meaning, hidden and obvious.

Reading is my favorite pastime. And a parable is a heavenly story set in an earthly context. Everyone and everything is symbolic. The key to unlocking a parable is to correctly interpret the symbolism.

So what is Jesus trying to tell the disciples with this parable? In reading, dissecting and researching it, I realized that there are many ways to look at it and approach it, too numerous for a Sunday sermon. Maybe one of the classes that Pastor Jean is trying to start could be entitled: "Examining the Parables of Jesus." Anyway, I chose to focus first, on the last – verse that is. Jesus ends the story with a warning – "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." What is interesting is he also precedes the parable with the same warning in the final verse of Chapter 19.

Since this warning both precedes and follows the parable we are looking at, it is evident that the parable was told to explain the warning! And since the warning was first given in response to a question from Peter, if we are to examine what this parable means we need to look at the setting that preceded its telling.

Matthew 19:16-30

### The Rich and the Kingdom of God

16 Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

17 “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

18 “Which ones?” he inquired.

Jesus replied, ““You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother,’[a] and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’[b]”

20 “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

21 Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?”

26 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

27 Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

28 Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or

brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife[c] or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Our rich young man wants Jesus to tell him how to have eternal life. Jesus says, keep the commandments. The young man says “I have kept them. What else do I have to do?” Jesus challenges him to give up all his worldly possessions to the poor and thereby receive treasure in heaven and then follow Him. But what happens? The rich young man is unable to accept the challenge. He walks away because he cannot bear to give up his wealth.

But Peter immediately draws a contrast of himself and the disciples with the self-centered rich man saying “hey, we’ve given up everything and followed you, so what are you going to give us? Can’t you see the wheels turning in the disciples’ heads: They’re thinking, wow, we gave up our families, homes, money, and our way of life. We’ve been doing this a long time and we have followed Him everywhere. We’ve endured many hardships. Holy smokes, our reward must be absolutely amazing! And Jesus doesn’t disappoint. Yes, they will be handsomely rewarded and have eternal life. But he warns them by saying “But many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.” What in the world does that mean? We’ll get to it in a moment.

So the scene is set and then Jesus launches into the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. Now, this is not one of the more popular parables, and for good reason. At first glance, it goes against the grain of one our most deeply cherished values: the value of hard work and just reward: The more you work and more productive you are, the more you ought to get paid. I don’t know many who would argue with that. But that is not what happens here. The landowner goes to the marketplace early in the morning looking for workers for his vineyard and promises to pay them a

fair wage. They agree to the wage and are thrilled to have the work to feed their family. Off they go to the vineyard. The landowner goes to the marketplace 4 more times throughout the day and each time he finds more people who want work but have not been hired. He hires them and sends them to his vineyard. Then it gets interesting...At the end of the work day the landowner tells his foreman to pay the workers their wages **beginning with the last hired and ending with the first hired** (the last will be first and the first will be last). The foreman pays each worker the exact same amount of money, regardless of how long they worked. Now, when I first read this, and probably when many of you first heard it, our reaction was one of, if not outrage then certainly surprise at the unfairness and injustice to the workers who worked longer hours. Why did workers who only worked one to a few hours earn the same as workers who had been under the scorching sun from early morning to dusk? That doesn't seem fair. Well, some of the workers had just that reaction and started grumbling. But how does the landowner respond to such grumbling and complaining? He rebukes them, telling them...I'm not being unfair, we agreed on a fair wage and I have paid it to you. Take it and go. Aren't I allowed to do what I want with my money? So the last will be first and the first will be last.

Jesus' message to his disciples is this: God's grace is extended in equal measure to all who believe, **whether they came to their faith early in their lives, or much later.**

Jesus Christ is the landowner, the kingdom of heaven is the vineyard. The first workers represent the disciples and others like them who are called by Christ through the gospel early in life, and who therefore may labor long and hard in the "vineyard"/kingdom of God. The other workers represent those who are called by Christ through the gospel at various times – some are called late in life and do not have an opportunity to do as much for the Lord.

It's important to remember that the later workers didn't refuse work earlier in the day, they simply weren't hired. They didn't say no and then wait until the end of the day so that they wouldn't have to work as long. The landowner, Jesus, went in search of workers, to bring in all he found. They did not look him up, come to Him and beg Him for a job in His vineyard. He went out and found them and invited them to come and work for Him. And they were eager to work. This, Jesus says, is what the Kingdom of heaven is like. It comes to us and calls us to enter it. The Kingdom of heaven is not something that we must qualify for by good performance or length of service. It is not awarded to us for the sacrifices we have made. It is strictly because the Master went out to find us, repeatedly if necessary, and called to us by His Word – "You go into my vineyard too." This is what the kingdom of heaven is like. And this is the message that Jesus gives Peter and the other disciples. Yes, you have served me well and have been with me a long time, and yes, you have sacrificed a great deal. However, that does not get you a fast pass into my Father's kingdom, nor does it qualify you for a better heavenly reward. You will receive the same gifts of grace and eternal life from God as the person who comes to genuine faith after a lifetime of not believing. You my disciples do not get more and the other does not receive less. The last will be first and the first will be last.

When we are called by the gospel to obey Christ, we should respond at once! For some, we may hear the invitation early in life. Others may not come to know of the gospel until late in life. As laborers in the vineyard (i.e., the kingdom), we should work diligently in whatever time we may have left. We may be blessed to offer a full life of service to the Lord or we may only have a short time. We should do whatever we can out of a genuine, spiritual enthusiasm and faith, not with a mercenary spirit (in other words, "Do I get more because I gave more?"). This parable teaches equality – not of opportunity, but of faithfulness.

New Testament professor Darell Doughty puts it this way: “In the kingdom of God all people are already equal – because all people are loved by God.” In God’s kingdom, every person should receive “what is right” - regardless of the work they do. In God’s kingdom, all people are equal – rich and poor, wealthy and destitute, righteous and sinners, powerful and powerless – all people are equal because all people are loved by God. And since this is true in God’s kingdom, it should also be true in the life of the church, whether we are leaders or helpers, teachers or students, administrators or nursery attendants. And we all receive exactly what is right, from a God who is notoriously generous. We must always remember just who is telling this parable. Jesus is the Master of the house, the owner of the vineyard. He is the generous One. He is allowed to do what He chooses with what belongs to Him. And **WE** belong to Him! He has gone out from His vineyard and found us and spoken His Word to us, “you go into the vineyard too.” He says. And He has chosen to pay us the wages that we are due. And just what are they? They are the wages of sin and death. And these are the wages Jesus has paid. He has paid the wages due for our sin, in full, with His blood, whether we were the first, the last or somewhere in between, by his incredible generosity and amazing grace.

I would like to close with this illustration.

The story is told of a man who died and went to heaven. St. Peter met him at the pearly gates and asked to examine his qualifications. “We have a point system,” St. Peter said, “and only those with enough points are allowed to enter.”

“Points?” the man asked, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

St. Peter explained, “It’s simple. We determine how many points you have by the life you’ve led. We require a hundred points to get in. Tell me about your life, and I’ll add up your points.”

The man thought for a moment and said, “Well, let’s see. I was a faithful member of my church for over forty-seven years. I served as a deacon and an elder, and I taught Sunday School.”

St. Peter said, “Very good. You get one point.”

The man said to himself, “Oh, my! Well, let’s see, I was a good husband and a good father. I gave a tithe to the church, and I contributed to all sorts of charities. I helped with various civic projects, and I served on several committees. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“St. Peter said, “Indeed it does. You get another point.”

The man’s face sank, and he said, “I can see now, I’ll never make it. The only way I’d ever get into this place is by the grace of God.”

St. Peter smiled and said, “And *that*, my friend, is worth ninety-eight points. Welcome!”

Let us pray: Dear God, through your amazing grace we are welcomed into your kingdom and granted eternal life regardless of when we came to know you and walk in Your Way. Whether we are first or last, your love and grace are equal, and for that we give You thanks. Amen