

Latecomers to the Vineyard
Philippians 1:1-11
Matthew 20:1-16

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

From an idle season that scattered this community, we have returned to a place and a people many of us have come to call home. Yet even as we hied to the hills or commuted “down the shore” or chose a road less traveled that may have made all the difference, none of us were able to escape the common context of a nation in political turmoil and a globe in economic crisis. Mercifully, the parable before us this morning could not be more incisive about the world as we have ordered it or more insistent about the world for which we were made.

I once thought I knew this parable’s sting. I thought I understood its point: that God’s gracious love and mercy cannot be contained by our quid pro quo sense of justice. Moreover, I thought I got its critique of my unexamined life, judging the world as I have ordered it by the reversals that await me in the kingdom of heaven. This morning, the parable still stings and its judgment remains after a week of wrestling with these characters, but not as I had once assumed.

To be fair, I had come by my understanding honestly. From the early church until the present, the assumption has been that the landowner is God while the day laborers expose our disgruntled take on God’s freedom to be gracious. Allegorically, Irenaeus thought the hours the workers were called represented distinct periods in the story of salvation: early morning—Adam to Noah; the third hour—Noah to Abraham; the sixth hour—Abraham to Moses; the ninth hour—Moses to Jesus; the eleventh hour—Jesus to the end of the world. For Origen, the hours brought to mind the stages of our lives: childhood at dawn, youth at nine, adulthood at noon, old age at three, really old age at five. Jerome, Gregory, the Venerable Bede and Aquinas thought the

parable was about the clergy (the workers) and the church (the vineyard) while a denarius stood for eternal life. Concerning Augustine's battle with Pelagius over grace and works, Augustine took the parable as support for his belief that salvation depends wholly on God's promises, equating Pelagius' position on moral perfectibility with the first to be hired. Jumping to the Reformation, Martin Luther predictably railed against the first hired because they were Pelagians who believed they had earned their way to heaven by good works, while those hired at the eleventh hour rightly rejoiced in God's mercy. As for our team, John Calvin is equally predictable. "According to the decree of God," he wrote, "everyone is placed in his special province so that he sit not around idle....Men were created in order to do something." For Calvin, the parable concerns our vocation in this world, a sermon worthy of another time when, in the land, there are jobs to be had.

But what if we closed our ears to two thousand years of interpretation and listened as if we had stumbled over the parable for the first time. What if the things Matthew tells us before and after Jesus tells us the parable make all the difference in the world to our understanding of its meaning? Consider, in the first place, the two stories immediately preceding the parable. The first concerns a man who asks what good deed he must do to inherit eternal life, a story that ends in Jesus telling him he lacks one thing: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, give your money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The young man turns back grieving because he had many possessions.

In a second story, Peter asks Jesus what the disciples will have in heaven because they have left everything to follow him. "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake," says Jesus, "will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But," he adds (or is it Matthew who adds this?), "many who are first will

be last, and the last will be first.” Then, without skipping a beat or taking a breath, Jesus says “A landowner went out early in the morning....”

Already I find myself wondering if Matthew presumes the landowner is God or if Matthew presumes the landowner is like the young man who had many possessions. And does Peter’s question of Jesus, concerning what he will have, first have to do with the economic situation of those who follow Jesus and only afterward with those who get into heaven? Furthermore, Matthew follows the parable with a discussion of status and Jesus’ admonition concerning those who rule over others [landowners, for instance], as well as a caution that anyone who wishes to be great must be servants and whoever wishes to be first must be a slave. Given Matthew’s context, we would do well to listen to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard again.

A landowner goes out early in the morning. If we do not skip over this detail, presuming the landowner to be God, we might be surprised that the landowner goes out himself, instead of his steward, to do the hiring. The parable means to lay bare the actions of the landowner. In those days and according to New Testament scholar William Herzog, Matthew’s listeners likely would have known that “owners of great estates increased their holdings through foreclosures on loans, leading to hostile takeovers of peasant farms. When possible, the land so annexed was converted into vineyards so it could produce a product with a higher return than the mixed grains grown by subsistence peasant farmers.” I promise I am not making this up!

Early in the morning, the landowner goes to the agora where day laborers have gathered in hopes of being hired. That workers were still available at the eleventh hour, says Joachim Jeremias, suggests the parable is set in “a period over which broods the specter of unemployment.” Hmmm. The landowner agrees to pay a handful of day laborers what the NRSV

translates as “the usual daily wage” which is a denarius. An honest translation would read that the landowner agrees to pay them next to nothing. He goes out again at nine o’clock and hires another group standing idle, promising to pay them whatever is right. What choice have they but to agree? This is repeated at noon, at three and at five, which is as close to closing time as you can get. Of the last hired he asks, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They reply, “Because no one has hired us.”

Listen to what they say of themselves rather than what has been said of them: because no one has hired us! Whereas the owner of the vineyard has escaped scrutiny over the last two thousand years, the laborers have been reviled: they have chosen to be idle; they prefer their justice to God’s generosity; they reject the gospel by holding mercy hostage to merit; they are envious; they forget the grace that got them a job and grumble over their pay; they think they merit more; they are the very embodiment of resentment.

Who were the day laborers in Jesus’ time and still in Matthew’s? According to sociologist Luise Schottroff, they are most likely “the uprooted whom hunger drives into the countryside at harvest time but who at other seasons look for occasional work in the cities—and who, often enough, must beg as well.’ They have little bargaining power, owing to the surfeit of laborers on the market. Even slaves are treated with more care because they represent an investment; by contrast, day laborers are ‘a kind of slave at their own risk.’” In short, they are the expendables whose lives, wrote Thomas Hobbes famously, are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Given the economy, the best they could hope for was occasional work.

Might it be that the world of Jesus’ parable was not the world to come but the world that still is too much with us? But wait, for we are only halfway through the parable! Evening falls and the owner says to the manager, “Call the laborers and give them their pay” from last to first.

And even though we know what is about to happen, it never fails to insult our sense of fairness, because we unfailingly identify with the laborers who have been at it since the break of day. We are Calvin's team, after all! We work hard, not in order to earn God's favor, but in response to God's grace!

Yet in the culture of the Middle East, the landowner's method of payment would be understood as an act of shaming. One among them protests and the landowner says "Friend!" The word is not *phile* that would be used with a social equal but *hetaire*, a condescending appellation used to address someone below another in social rank. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?", a line that has been taken to refer to the freedom of God rather than the capriciousness of one who lords it over another.

Finally Jesus says, or Matthew adds as if to close the parentheses, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Knowing Matthew's context and the economic realities of an agrarian society during a time of high unemployment, I suddenly find it hard to believe the "first" refers to anyone other than the landowner, to the one who likely went away from Jesus' presence more furious than he was grief-stricken, the one who could not give up anything—including a tax loophole or two—to follow Jesus.

Why is it that the offense traditionally taken at Jesus' telling of this parable was offense at the grace shown to the last hired? I think it no mystery why! Individually, we think ourselves the first to be hired. Institutionally and post-Constantine, the landed church preferred to spiritualize those parts of the gospel that came too close to her purse for comfort, privileging Matthew's blessing of the poor in spirit over Luke's blessing of the poor; making day workers the villains of a story while equating the landowner with God. Perhaps the time has come, and is long since passed, to reconsider the meaning of this parable for such a time as this.

Today, there is no disputing the numbers of unemployed; the households below the poverty line; the percentage of children with one parent working, at most, part-time; the foreclosures again on the rise. The question is whether we listen to the voices that blame the 2.6 million who have joined the 42.6 million poor in this nation last year; whether we believe the pundits who villainize them and tell us that they prefer idleness to work; whether we condescend with our charity while holding on to our possessions which are many; whether we laud the landowners as gods who choose to do what they wish with what belongs to them; or will we listen, in the year ahead, to the voice of him who cautions that those who would be great must be servants and whoever would to be first must be a slave?

The twentieth chapter ends with yet another story of two blind men sitting on the roadside. They hear Jesus pass by and cry out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” Of course, the religious crowd around Jesus tries to silence them, but they shout all the more: “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!” Jesus stops, turns and asks them what they want him to do for them. They say, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.”

Would that we would ask of him the same, wretches begging to know his amazing grace, latecomers one and all to the vineyard, where the first are last and the last first! Who dares stand idle? Welcome home!