

Workers in the Vineyard
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Our scripture this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew, the 20th chapter. It's another parable. Jesus, the brilliant storyteller, is at it again, creating a vivid image of the Kingdom of Heaven using an everyday situation. Like all of his parables, this one is surprising and puzzling and gives us much food for thought. Throughout his ministry, Jesus offers us multiple images of the kin-dom of Heaven....he says it's like a banquet where the most undesirable are invited, and like a woman who turns her house upside down to find a lost coin, and a sower who tosses seeds into different types of soil, and a farmer who lets weeds grow among the wheat until harvest time, and a father who runs to greet a lost son - to name only a few. A beautiful mosaic of images that serve to expand our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus and to be co-creators of God's kingdom here on earth.

Let's pray together –

Open the eyes of our hearts, O God, to see the truth found in your word this morning. Quiet all other voices other than your own, that we might hear and feel and live your grace as faithful disciples. AMEN

Matthew 20:1–16

Jesus says,

“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." AMEN.

There's work that needs to be done in the vineyard... and we need a little work to unpack this parable!

Right away, Jesus' listeners would have known the vineyard in Jesus' story as a metaphor for Israel and the owner of that vineyard, God. The vineyard is God's property.

The landowner heads to the marketplace at the crack of dawn to find workers to tend to the land.

Now the Greek word that the New Revised Standard version of the Bible translates as “landowner”, according to the scholar and professor Amy Jill Levine, is more akin to “house-holder,” and it can have dual meanings. It can indicate the image of God and is also translated elsewhere in Matthew as a faithful follower of God.

In the marketplace the landowner offers the first workers the usual daily wage - a denarius - for laboring for 12 hours in the intense sun. The Roman silver denarius would supply a family with three to six days of food. (Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 224). A fair wage, not extravagant for a full day’s work.

So far, a pretty ordinary story, but Jesus throws in a twist... or three. The landowner returns at 9 am to the marketplace to find more people who are “standing idle.” Again, Levine notes that the translation of the Greek is not quite right and “standing idle” might better be translated as those “without work.” We do not know why these folks are without work- the text doesn’t say. They could be lazy, maybe old or infirm, but perhaps not. Perhaps they were caring for a sick family member, a young child, or had a job that finished early. For these 9 am workers, there is no promise of a denarius, a usual wage, only what is “right.”

This scene is played out again at noon, and 3 pm, and once more when there’s a mere hour left in the workday. The householder continues to go to the marketplace, tapping folks on the shoulder with the promise of work and a fair wage.

The late theologian and author Rachel Held Evans notes that “anyone who wants work will get work, even if they show up late, even if they stumble into the marketplace tired, uncertain or sick...even if no one wants them. This isn’t about being qualified, it is about being called. It’s about being invited to join in the work, if only for a short while.”

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lectionary-workers-vineyard-landowner>)

And in the surprising conclusion, the landowner gathers the workers and pays the same wages to the ones who were hired last as those who worked all day. Not surprisingly, this creates quite a stir.

The workers protest – after all, they endured the “burden of the day and the scorching heat” and are being paid the same. They should get more – it’s only fair.

But the landowner is doing what’s right.

There are multiple interpretations of this story, and rightfully so.

Amy Jill Levine posits that while this parable has historically been interpreted as a story about who will receive salvation. It’s a good and reasonable interpretation, yet she encourages us to shift our theological perspective, observing that Jesus seems to be more concerned about how we love our neighbor than how we get into heaven. As people of faith, we know that God has taken care of that.

So, what does this story provoke in those of us who seek to follow Jesus and love our neighbor more faithfully?

Maybe the story highlights the economic inequalities that were present in Jesus’ day and continue to exist in our world. What responsibility do we bear for systems and structures that continue to offer qualified women and people of color a lower wage than white male counterparts? The story asks us to study the growing racial wealth gap caused by the long legacy of racism in the country and how we in the church might address it. Or maybe the story draws us to deeply reflect and give thanks for our relative wealth and consider how we steward our resources both individually and as a church as co-creators of an upside-down kin-dom of God. It could be a stewardship sermon!

Jesus tells this parable right after the disciple Peter cries, “We have left everything to follow you! What’s in it for us?” and just before the mother of James and John request special privileges for her sons because they have joined Jesus’ ministry. Maybe the story is yet another way of Jesus saying that God’s kingdom is unlike the kingdom of this world.

In God’s kingdom there is no fighting one’s way to the top because there IS no top.

When the workers see those hired last being paid the same wage that they agreed to at the start of the day, their real complaint is that he is too generous. The landowner asks, “Are you envious because I am generous?”

Rachel Held Evans notes that the coworkers realize that they aren’t cheated by the landowner, but that the coworkers benefit from his generosity without earning it. She writes, “Funny how something good can suddenly seem like less simply because it is shared. It’s such a universal and familiar reaction it’s hard not to see ourselves in it, particularly those of us who operate within a culture that idolizes success and self-sufficiency where even gifts are expected to be deserved.”

Rachel Held Evans: <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lectionary-workers-vineyard-landowner>

Jesus is saying that in God’s kingdom, it isn’t about the pay, it’s about the work. God’s economy is not the world’s economy.

God’s love and grace is generous, expansive, beyond what we can imagine... but it isn’t fair. Thanks be to God that we are not the judges of who receives what and when. This is God’s table, God’s world, God’s kingdom. God’s church.

Evans goes on to point out that the miracle isn't that we get to share in the reward, but that we get to share in the work. If we want in on this kingdom, if we want in on this work, she says, we need to set aside our small notion of what it means to deserve, what it means to be fair and to earn. Because what makes God's grace offensive isn't who it leaves out, but who it lets in, starting with us. (Rachel Held Evans, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lectionary-workers-vineyard-landowner>)

On this Golden Harvest Sunday, we recognize those 80 and over and our friend-to-friend partners. We celebrate the lives who have shared in the work of kingdom building who are now in the golden years of their lives. People who offered decades of prayer, or gave hours to VEAP, PW, planted seeds, designed and built the sanctuary where we now worship. We remember those who passed along their faith to children and youth in Sunday School – children who are now grown. We honor those who answered phones and painted walls, who served food to their neighbors, and sent cards to the sick. The ones who sang in the choir, and all who blessed this place with their presence, prayers, and gifts. With gratitude we thank you for your discipleship and showing the next generations how service brings joy, and sometimes frustration, as well as a sense of being a part of something larger than ourselves. One of the beautiful things is that we honor those who have been a part of Oak Grove for over 80 years as well as two that just joined last week!

Like that landowner, God is constantly inviting people to participate in the justice-making, mercy-giving, extravagant love of Jesus in this broken and beautiful world, where everyone is valued, and no one is turned away.

God just keeps coming to get us, just as we are. All are needed, all are given gifts to share.

And that's about the coolest thing I can think of.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Sources:

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lectionary-workers-vineyard-landowner>

Levine, Amy Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Harper Collins: NY, 2014.