

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Proper 20 Year A
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The Gospel

Matthew 20:1-16

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."

The Sermon

I must confess, when I first read this text and knew I was on the schedule to preach, my first reaction was “I hate this story!”. Perhaps you do too. For it can call up in us our natural tendency to grumble, to think that justice is fairness, to immediately move into a scarcity mindset, worrying that I’m not getting enough.

Our story takes place in the vineyard, in the work place of the day, although it could just as easily take place in a family or in a church community, when the real issue is equity around money and what constitutes one’s daily wage. Jesus’ focus always was on how do we love our neighbor, how do we extend God’s generosity to one another, and this parable can be a lens into the challenge that can be, when money or any possession is involved.

Our relationship with money can be complicated. Our sense of self-worth, our capacity to control our lives or those of others, our sense of fairness can all be wrapped in how lightly or how tightly we hold onto money. And when our money is attached to what we do and who we are, the self-examination we are called into from today’s story is always important.

Since I’ve already confessed to you my hatred of this story, I’ll confess one other thing as well, just to show you how we all so naturally have this tendency to grumble. When we were recently evaluating the parish secretary’s benefits, I was really called up short by one of the members of the personnel committee. I was “grumbling” that since Betsy and I work each a minimum of 60 hours per week and we get 4 weeks vacation, how fair is it that the parish secretary who works 16 hours a week gets 3 weeks paid vacation. I was grateful for the member who raised up this parable to us in that conversation and was a champion for the justice of whomever would fill this position to have the time needed for family, rest, and necessary appointments which could only be arranged during the day. I was in the mindset of the 1st hired, grumbling about the last-hired getting almost what I got, for many less hours of work. I was comparing salaries, based on fairness, not justice, not what is constituted in the daily wage, our daily bread, which we pray for each week in the Lord’s prayer, that which a person needs to live a decent life.

This is often why in some corporations, comparing salaries is forbidden, for it can be considered a volatile activity. Chances are it will lead to charges of unfairness, a sense of being discriminated against, a decline in employee morale, and as the gospel indicates, an epidemic of grumbling. Even if the employer comes clean and discloses the reasons

for the discrepancy in wages, the grumbling will persist. No reason is good enough when we sense someone got away with something and we did not. That is why this parable of the workers in the vineyard is arguably the most disliked parable of the Gospels. Its unfairness is so overwhelming it edges out the other one we struggle with, the welcome and feast for the son who squandered the inheritance, the return of the prodigal son, for the one we struggle with the most.

Even though in our parable this morning, the argument of the owner of the vineyard is beyond refutation “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”, it makes no headway against our outrage. We instinctively feel a mistake has been made. There is a deep sense of unfairness when the last are paid the same as the first. And we, who are always quick to feel offended, identify with the weary, heat-beaten first laborers.

This feeling of unfairness springs from a well-constructed mental tape. It’s basic message is, “If someone gets what I am getting but hasn’t put in as much work as I have, I am being cheated, even though I am getting the salary I agreed to, our daily wage. Most of us have this mental tape running continually. This makes us, in the language of the parable, grumble-ready.

This can happen in business; it can happen in families; it can happen in church.

I am convinced there is no greater time of vulnerability in a family, as when the inheritance is laid out among the survivors. Justice and fairness, as we may each define it, are not always aligned.

It can go both ways, if one daughter spent years caring for the invalid mother while the other one flitted about with no worries, and the inheritance is split equally, one might say fairly, each getting the same per their role as a child, then the one who spent all the time and energy and heart caring for their mother (the first hired) will feel slighted and grumble about the other one who had done much less for their mother, the last hired.

Or it can be divided based upon need of the remaining children, focusing on the justice of ensuring all will have their daily wage, and even though all are cared for and will have all they need, there can be grumbling among the one who got less (the first hired, who begins with more), for she thought they were equal as daughters in their mother’s eyes.

It can happen in these practical ways and also when we deal with the larger questions. Some people will ask me, with a sense of indignation in

their voice, basically how fair is it that someone who has lived a life of greed or crime or self-centeredness, but finds Jesus on their death bed is given the same salvation as we are, who have struggled moment by moment to know Christ and bring Christ into our world, who has been in church every Sunday, who has freely given money for Christ's work in the world year after year. Although we can certainly feel relieved and comforted by the knowledge that regardless of what we've done or when we've opened our hearts to Christ, we will be saved, it can still be hard not to grumble about what can be perceived as unfairness in God's grace.

It's a tricky business, managing our tendency to grumble, rather than to give thanksgiving for what we do have; we sometimes would rather focus on what could have or should have been ours, per our well-constructed mindset of what is fair.

St. Benedict, the 4th century abbot and founder of the Benedictine community, spoke a lot about the negative effect of grumbling in a community. Benedict stated in his Rule of Life, "Complaining and complacency are the two evils that community life most abhors and can least afford. Any community, any group, is poisoned by people who criticize constantly and exert themselves little.

This parable is challenging because it calls us out of our natural state of being grumble-ready.

Benedict also goes on to state in his Rule, "We must remember to start over and start over and start over until someday we control life more than it controls us. And so each moment we begin to feel offended by someone's actions or words, or find we want to grumble about some unfairness of life, we need to start anew, we need to turn ourselves around and put ourselves in the role of the last hired. Because only when we know the vulnerability that person lives in can we truly find in our hearts and comprehend the generosity that the landowner bestowed upon the last-hired, and offer the same to that person.

Sometimes it's very clear to us who the "last-hired" is, for it is someone in our intimate circle whom we need to deal with constantly, releasing our resentment over and over again.

Sometimes it takes work to stretch our perspective to find the "Last-hired" in our settings, our family, our work places, or our church. This can be one way this parable presents a challenge to our church.

I've spent a lot of time this week thinking about who are the last-hired whom I know and who are those whom I still overlook? Who are the ones

who have been willing to work, for a job or for the Kingdom, whom society or the church has overlooked?

Who does not receive their daily bread, not because of lack of desire for purposeful work, but because the corporate structure of compensation seems to be set up for injustice and oppression of their workers, rather than offering all a respectable wage for all.

I wonder who are the ones who wait patiently for someone to recognize them, to affirm their labors, to invite them into our church? Perhaps they are those whom society calls the nons – the non-believers, or perhaps they are the seekers, perhaps they are the ones who have this yearning to understand and know Jesus, but don't know how that connects to church life, and don't always feel welcomed when they come into church, with a liturgy they don't understand or a lack of comprehension of what some of our language really means. Or who are the ones in our parish who some would say are on the margin of our family group, but who equally or perhaps more, need our support and love as the members who are here every Sunday?

This passage may be a challenge to our church, for it invites us to open our eyes more fully to the last-hired in our community.

I think our story tells us to find the last-hired, to not look at them with resentment or fear that they will take something from us, but rather allow a spirit of generosity to fill our hearts, for we can learn a lot from them. For the vulnerability the last hired live in, of not knowing if they will have the daily bread their families need, of not knowing if anyone will ever hire them again, of feeling the guilt and shame of being overlooked again and again, of feeling inadequate to make decisions in their lives, of their lives being dependent upon other's good will, is the vulnerability we are called to live in before God.

We pray each time in the Lord's prayer for our daily bread, that which will sustain us day by day. Jesus gives us this, not more, not less. We cannot hoard nor store this spiritual reality of grace, for when we do, we find ourselves believing we are self-sufficient and no longer need what God offers us.

In God's heavenly realm, this bestowal of "daily bread" is not correlated to the amount of work done. I am not more graced by God for working 60 hours a week for the Kingdom than the parish secretary who works 16. We each receive our daily bread, that which we need each day, for it flows out of the nature of God which is good and gracious. God doesn't owe us anything, but gives us everything.

What our story tells us is that each group gets what they need and it is because each group needs each other; the workers need the money, and the owner needs the labor. But the corporate point is even stronger, when we look at other at other examples and at the larger message of the gospel.

The prodigal son benefits from the work of the elder brother; the sinful tax collector benefits from the righteousness of the Pharisee; sinful humanity benefits from the righteousness and sacrifice of Jesus. In our parable this morning, the last hired benefit from the contract made with their coworkers; they benefit from an employer who pays a just wage to those who labor; they benefit from an employer who is generous with his money. Thus, not only do householder and laborer need each other, the work of some laborers benefits the lives of others. In the end, all have enough to eat, and the rich recognize their responsibility to those who are less well off, a responsibility that includes not simply giving a handout, but hiring workers who can thus preserve their dignity.

This is the kingdom of God we are to bring in, on earth as it is in heaven: one which is based on God's justice and mercy; one which requires acknowledgment of our vulnerability and need for each other; one in which we are called to push beyond our grumbling and our mindset of fairness and respond with God's generosity to all, especially to those who we feel have wronged us. This is one strong message from this parable. No wonder we hate this story!

Amen.