Matthew 20:1-16

1‘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 market-place;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.’

Title: A Labor of Love

Jesus’ parables are like windows that give us a glimpse of God. They don’t just tell us how we’re supposed to treat one another; they illustrate how God treats us. God is the father who waits patiently for his prodigal son to return, and when he sees him on the horizon with his head slumped in shame runs out to embrace him and welcome him. God is the Good Samaritan who carries us to safety and tends to our wounds even though we may look upon him as our enemy. God is the good shepherd who would not hesitate to leave ninety-nine of his sheep who dwell in safety to come searching for the one sheep that is lost.

The problem we have when we look through the window into God’s kingdom is that we cannot always comprehend what we’re seeing. God’s way of going about doing things seems so far removed from our own way of doing things. If one of our sons asked for his inheritance before we died, we would take offense, and if he squandered his money, we would be apt to let him suffer, to “learn his lesson.” If our enemy was wounded by the road, we might avoid him. If we are charged with watching 100 sheep and one gets lost, we might say we’re doing well to have only lost one rather than risk our lives and the lives of the other sheep to search for the one that is lost. Sometimes the differences between the way God goes about His business and the way we go about our business are so great that we give up trying to understand God. But if we truly seek God, we must look through that window that Jesus gives us until we have some idea of what God is up to. We can’t just shake our head and walk away if we are sincere about being disciples. If the parable makes no sense to us, it means we need to take a deeper look lest we remain blind to our own folly.

Today’s parable of the workers in the field defies our understanding of fair labor practices. We operate on the principle of fair compensation for one’s labor, *but this parable flies in the face of that ethic.* Here we have those laborers who work one hour receiving the same wages as those who worked ten hours. Consider as well the fact that the laborers who dwell in the marketplace and are not among those who were initially picked to work are generally those who are the least *desirable* laborers from a productivity point of view – they are the weak, the scrawny, the sickly, the afflicted. Their per-hour productivity would even be far less than that of those laborers who were selected first. What’s more is that those who worked one hour get paid before those who worked ten (the last are first and the first are last). But this paradigm depicts the *modus operandi* of the kingdom of heaven. So how do we square this counterintuitive labor policy described in today’s lesson with our world and our time?

The landowner in this parable represents God. What do we make of the fact that God would compensate those who work an hour the same as he would compensate those who would work ten? Where is the justice in that? True, God has not broken any labor laws – he gives the wages he promised to those who work the full day. But how can he justify giving the same wage to those who worked one tenth as long, and because these last to be picked were probably the “least desirable” laborers, they probably did far less than a tenth of the work? Furthermore, why does he pay them first? Is it just to infuriate those who worked the whole day? Wouldn’t it have been more discreet, caused less uproar, if he had paid those who worked the longest first, then once they had gone home paid those who worked less?

To begin, the reason that the first are last has to do with their hearts. Those who are paid last are intentionally paid last because they need to learn the lesson of this parable. In a way, those who are the last are those who are kept after class or after school for some private counseling. God, in his infinite wisdom and mercy, teaches them something about His love and our failure to embrace that love. God’s love and grace are parceled out evenly. There is no one who receives a greater or smaller portion of God’s love or grace; His love and His grace are both infinite, and we all receive infinitely. We cannot ask God for more of his love, because he already gives every bit of it to us. And neither His love nor His grace depend upon our labors. To say that they *did* depend upon our actions would mean that there was no love or grace, because by their very definition love nor grace are not contingent upon anything. So whether we work for God for one day or one lifetime, our wages remain the same: God gives us precisely what we need for each day of our lives. That’s what a denarius was.

And the reason we want more than that is because of our own false sense of worth. Think about the way our world, our culture functions economically. We are compensated according to how productive we are, i.e. how much work we get done. Productivity is a function of skill level, hours worked, or sometimes profit generated. As long as we are intelligent, physically fit, and motivated individuals, we can be productive and earn a fair wage. Hence we have come to expect that if someone else is more productive than we are, they should be paid more, and someone who is less productive should earn less. This is why someone who is mentally or physically challenged is paid less than one who is mentally or physically “fit.” You rarely see the severely disabled living in luxury apartments or homes. You don’t see them dining in gourmet restaurants. More often you see them riding busses as opposed to catching cabs. Why? Because this is how the kingdom of man compensates those who are less productive. We have some minimum standard that we set, and we compensate them according to that standard. Meanwhile, the physically and mentally “fit” are recruited for labor young and early, much like the laborers in today’s parable who get picked up at 9 a.m.

We are used to this system. We’re comfortable with it. It seems “fair” by our standards. But could you imagine a world where those who are mentally or physically weak receive the same wages as those who are mentally or physically strong? This is precisely what is describing in this parable. It’s the same now as it was 2000 years ago – those who are employed first are the ones who are deemed to be the most productive, the ones who we deem to be worth more. The problem is that God doesn’t consider any one worth more than anyone else. He doesn’t love anyone more than he loves someone else.

The problem comes in when define our worth in terms apart from God. We measure it in income, in houses, in bank balance, in material possessions, and we try to get a sense of peace through all of these means rather than seeking the only true source of peace, which is the assurance of God’s steadfast love. And as our sense of worth is dependent upon our possessions, our wages, and our rewards, and as we have an insatiable hunger to be more worthy than anyone else, we look at God’s evenly distributed love and grace and say, this isn’t enough. I deserve more. I’ve done more work. I’ve been more committed. I’ve been sweating in the hot sun and these other people have hardly begun to work. Then, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we try to gather the most manna, more than what we really need, only to discover that what we tried to save becomes infested with maggots.

In this parable, we detect something telling in the grumbling laborers’ attitude toward their work. These folks “have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” They have looked upon their work as simply a miserable means to an unattainable end rather than looking at the work as an end in itself. Note Paul’s attitude toward his work in today’s epistle reading: “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me” The labor is the reward. Hence those who labor longer are harder are rewarded for their labor by none other than their labor. The more we love others in Christ, the more we see the fruits of our labors, and as we rejoice with those who rejoice, our joy multiplies.

The first will be last, and the last will be first. Those who don’t “get” God’s love and grace, who are looking for special compensation, some special recognition, deprive themselves of the joy of God’s kingdom. It is the weak, the crippled, the sick, precisely those people who Jesus was derided for associating with, who are best able to appreciate God’s infinite love and grace, who are the first to enter the kingdom.

May God help us to be content with the wages he gives each of us, nothing less than his infinite love, and may we find joy not in our own service of the one and true loving God.