

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 24, 2023 – PENTECOST 17 / PROPER 20, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: “Early or late? Just *come to Jesus!*”

Old Testament	Jonah 3:10-4:11	(Jonah’s story demonstrates God’s unconditional mercy)
Psalter	Psalms 145:1-8	(The Lord is full of compassion and kindness)
Epistle	Philippians 1:21-30	(As believers, whether we live or die, we are with Christ)
Gospel	St. Matthew 20:1-16	(Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers who were all paid the same)

Biblical commentator F.W. Beare has called today’s Gospel story “The Parable of the Eccentric Employer.” After all, who in their right mind pays a person who has only worked one hour the same as he pays someone who has done the same hard job for 12 hours?¹ But here, Jesus isn’t talking about running a business. Rather, He tells this story to illustrate the—perhaps unreasonable—kindness and compassion of God.

In Jesus’ time, the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, recorded high unemployment, particularly after the completion of a building campaign undertaken by King Agrippa (whom St. Luke references in the Book of Acts). Josephus writes that “above eighteen thousand” workmen were “receiving no wages.”² Moreover, there was no Social Security or Welfare to fall back on, and no trade union power to protect the laborer. So, in the case of Jesus’ parable, the landowner could pay his workers whatever he wanted to.

The details of the story could easily have happened in any Jewish village at the grape harvest. One denarius was quite a generous wage for a full day’s unskilled labor as evidenced by the fact that the first set of workers readily agreed to it. Up to that point, the story seems rather uneventful. But then Jesus throws us three surprises. First, the employer goes down to the job market himself. Second, when he pays off the laborers at the end of the day, he gives everyone the same wage. And third, the workers’ reaction is, “That’s not fair!” So let’s look at these three surprises.

First, the fact that the boss went to recruit the workers himself. For unskilled labor, it would have been far more usual to send a foreman to hire the laborers. So, who is this unusual employer? Jesus’ hearers would have recognized that the landowner represents God and the vineyard symbolizes Israel—a familiar theme throughout the Old Testament, especially in Psalm 80, where the psalmist compares Israel to a vine clipping taken from Egypt and planted in the land of Canaan.

So, if God is the boss, and the workers in the vineyard are those called to be His servants, Jesus is telling us that God personally cares for each of us, and calls each of us to our own ministry, regardless of how humble or great we may be, and regardless of whether we come to the “vineyard” early in the day, or as the sun is setting.

The second surprise is that, at the end of the day, the landowner gives each worker the same wage no matter how short or long they had worked. Obviously, those who had labored longer expected more. On the other hand, those same laborers had agreed to work 12 hours in the vineyard for one denarius. It’s amazing how often *we* suddenly want more, as soon as we hear that someone else has received more favorable terms than we think we should have. Would the workers have been as dissatisfied with their pay if those who had only worked one hour received half a denarius? Perhaps Jesus is saying that we should be content with what God gives us, and not be jealous if we think someone else is getting a better deal.

On the other hand, I’ve always loved this parable for different reason. To me, the same reward given to every servant in God’s kingdom is eternal life. No more, and no less. The ones who come to the vineyard early are those Christians who have known the Lord since they were children. They went to church, Sunday school, vacation bible school, church camp, youth retreats—you name it. These are the lifelong believers—the ones who’ve been laboring in God’s vineyard from sunup to sundown.

The ones who squeak through close to sunset are people who come to the Lord later in life—possibly even on their deathbed, as happened to my beloved father. These are the people who have either grown up unchurched, or who may have left the Church because they were angry at God. They may have been nominal Christians who attended Church without believing—as was my Dad. Or they could even have been atheists, agnostics, or adherents of a non-Christian religion. After all, today we read about Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus and many others coming to faith in Christ as their Messiah, Lord, and Savior.

It occurred to me that the theme of today’s parable is similar to Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. In that story, the older son complains about the unfairness of his father throwing a lavish party for the errant son who has finally returned. But the father says to him: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. . . . we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (Luke 15:31b-32 NRSV). In actuality, the generous, loving, forgiving father [a stand-in for God] is hosting the banquet for *both* sons—the longtime faithful one, and the one who has arrived late.

The reason Jesus utters the paradoxical, “the last shall be first, and the first will be last” is because both the long-timers and the late-comers get the same reward—eternal life with God. This revelation of God’s impartial mercy, compassion, and kindness should also give us hope and encouragement to continue praying for loved-ones who don’t have faith, or may have chosen to avoid the Church.

The third surprise isn’t that surprising. It’s the reaction of the laborers who had worked the whole day, only to receive the same pay as those who had worked a partial day. Their response? Matthew writes: “they grumbled against the landowner.” Doubtless, today, they would have hauled the boss before the Board of Labor Relations. But if the vineyard owner had given the end-of-day workers only one-twelfth of a denarius, they wouldn’t have been able to feed themselves or their families. This certainly adds a different perspective to the story, one in which we see that the Lord rewards our *need*, not our *greed*.³ He gives to each of us equally of His love and grace, His help and guidance, and above all, His forgiveness and salvation.

All the laborers worked in the vineyard for as long—or as short—a time as the landowner had asked them to. And, by each one being faithful, their reward was the same. Or, as Jesus summed it up in Matthew 6:33: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things [that you need] will be given to you as well.” We can be assured that in this world, God will supply all our needs—not necessarily our wants—as we labor to do that which He has called us to. And, we can be assured that in the life to come, no matter how long or short a believer has known, believed in, and trusted Jesus Christ, every one who does *will* receive eternal life. That blessed existence where the Book of Revelation (21:4b,c) tells us, “God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

If you’re anything like me, you long with all your heart for everyone you know or care about to go to heaven. But it’s not enough for them or us to be good people. Scripture makes two divine promises we should never forget: John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” And Acts 4:12 (NLT), “There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven [the Name of Jesus] by which we must be saved.”

Let us rejoice that each of us who labors for the Lord, however long or short, receives the same reward—eternity with Him!

And let us to pray for those who have not yet come to the vineyard:

Eternal God, Lord of Heaven and Earth, we lift up our hearts to You for those we know and love who have not yet found You. Seek each one passionately, and bring them into a life-changing, life-renewing relationship with Your Son Jesus Christ, even if You choose to wait until their last breath. Please, Father, may we share heaven with our fellow vineyard workers, and be content with whatever you give us on this earth until that time. We ask this in the Precious Name of Jesus, who alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Martin Dale, “The Parable of the Eccentric Employer,” 19 September 2002, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-parable-of-the-eccentric-employer-revd-martin-dale-sermon-on-grace-50459?page=1&wc=800) <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-parable-of-the-eccentric-employer-revd-martin-dale-sermon-on-grace-50459?page=1&wc=800> 12 September 2023. Used with permission.

² Flavius Josephus, “Antiquities of the Jews – Book XX,” Chapter 9, Section 7:30, [The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-20.html) (1737) <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-20.html> 15 September 2023. Used with permission.

³ Dale, *op. cit.*