

Psalm 100 (MB) ~ Matthew 20:1-16

Glimpses of Heaven on Earth: Help Wanted (3rd of 6)

17th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Stewardship of Time and Talents Dedication ~ September 24, 2023

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Introduction to Scripture text:

"I will pay you whatever is right." That is what the landowner tells the laborers in the story I am about to read. If the Big Three U.S. carmakers, Ford, GM, and Stellantis, used this approach to their compensation and benefits offer, the United Auto Workers would likely not be on strike right now. Nor would the Screen Actors Guild—American Federation of Television and Radio Artists know as SAG-AFTRA, or the Writers Guild of America. At least not until the end of the shift or the shoot. Clearly, this landowner's sense of "right pay," at the end of the day did *not* square with what fair pay meant to those who had been hired first. Nor does the point of Jesus' parable square with our sense of fair. How can someone who worked the exact same job as you for just one hour, get paid the same amount as you do for working eight hours? If you are bothered by this parable, that's a good sign that you are getting the point. There's a reason why we can only catch glimpses of heaven on earth. Surely, God's ways are not our ways.

So, let's have a listen to the parable about the laborers in the vineyard, which Jesus told to his disciples. The insiders: his "first hires" so to speak. Keep in mind that in Matthew's gospel, this is the *last* parable Jesus tells *his* first hires, before he sends two of them to fetch the donkey for his final entrance into Jerusalem.

Sermon:

Did you hear what he just said? Those latecomers who only worked *one* hour at the end of the day (and probably didn't even break a sweat), got paid the same as the good, upright, hardworking folk who had been at it through the heat of the day? You know, the good, upright, hardworking, faithful longtime members. The stockholders, the charter members. Why didn't they get more than those lucky ones who just breezed under the wire? Where is the justice in that? It's outrageous. Shocking. It's not how things work in the real world. It's not fair.

Jesus plainly said, "the last shall be first and the first will be last" at the beginning as well as at the end of this parable. That is a good hint about the center of that story for him. Which happens to be great news if you are one of the last, someone who has been left standing, frozen out, on the fringe, "not a good fit," expendable, expungable. But this parable was clearly not for their ears. Jesus told this story to his inner circle, his twelve disciples. The anonymous author of Matthew wrote his gospel for the early Jewish-Christian community (early adopters) and for all of us churchgoers. You know: the washed, the saved, here at FPC Marshfield wherever you are who are listening or reading this sermon.

For those of us go-getters, who go to work early in the morning, go hard at it all day, and admire others who do the same, this is a hard lesson. We grumble (at least internally) about the slackers, those who just don't measure up, or follow the program exactly, according to prompt, decent and orderly Presbyterian protocol. Have these people not read the *Book of*

Order? Many of us card carrying Presbyterians identify much more readily with Martha who grumbles to Jesus that she is doing all the work, rather than Mary. And with the Elder Brother who grumbles when his ne'er do well spend-thrift younger brother gets the big party with the fatted calf after wasting it all. And honestly, didn't we also resent the way young Joseph flaunted that fancy, many-colored coat that daddy Jacob gave to little Joe, his favorite, and not his older brothers? What had he done to deserve it, anyway?

Here's the truth I see in this parable today: when we grumble, judge, or discount those latecomers as "less than," it breaks Jesus' heart. He is teaching us that the kingdom of heaven is not like that. Nothing like the way we do things here on earth, where for a certain upcharge or membership in a special club, we can go to the front of the line at the airport; at Disneyland we get to jump the long line and be among the first. Well, first fifty anyway. And most of us in this room, simply by the accident of our birth, arrived on this earth at the front of the line, metaphorically. (Consider that 46% of the world's population lives on less than \$5.50 a day, according to the World Bank.) Jesus is teaching us a different kind of valuation entirely. In the kingdom of heaven, birth order and privilege do not determine our worth.

It's a hard lesson to learn. Just days before his crucifixion, Jesus' disciples still weren't getting it. It was right on the heels of the rich young man walking off, unable to do what Jesus commanded him, when Peter blurted out, "Look, Jesus, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27) It was this very question that inspired or possibly irked Jesus enough to make up this parable about the laborers in the vineyard. Time was getting short and they still were wondering who would be first in line, on earth and in heaven.

Are we getting it? The point in this parable for us today is this: God does not play favorites! In the work of God's kingdom, in the work of unifying love: *all help is wanted equally and forever*. All hands on deck. In God's realm, whether we know it or not, each of us contains a unique combination of gifts and graces that are equally needed and equally cherished. No matter what messages the world has been giving you. No matter where you were born, or what family you were born into. No matter what your mental and physical capacities may be. God wants your help.

And help not only as a laborer but also as a steward or manager, employing, training, recruiting, lifting up those who have been standing there all day, all week, possibly for their whole lives. Think for a moment, who do you know who is standing idle, waiting to be given a chance to engage, to work, to contribute. Needing to know they are wanted and valued. That indeed, surprise, surprise: they are the perfect fit in God's eyes! Give that person a call, a text, a hug, or whatever kind of affirmation. It may be a group of people on the edge, at a border, yearning simply to belong and be gainfully employed in the kingdom of heaven on earth.

God wants and needs every one of us doing our best with the best we have been given for the work of restoring all that is broken in this world, here and now. Whenever we do this, we catch a glimpse of heaven on earth. Right here in FPC land, your help is wanted! In fact, that

sheet in your bulletin, "Stewardship of Time and Talents" inventory is one way to take action on this message right now. Here's the plan. Right after our "Time for Silent Prayer and Meditation" rather than singing a second hymn, like usual. Instrumental music will begin and continue for three minutes, while you complete the Stewardship of Time and Talents Inventory. Pull that out now so I can help explain a bit about it. Please remember to write your name on it. True to the spirit of this text and our church, it does not matter if this is the first time you ever visited FPC or if you have been a member here for more than fifty years. All are welcomed and encouraged to complete this inventory of your Time and Talent at this point in your one wild and precious life.

Now a few directions: You will also see, rather than simply checking items on this sheet, you are asked to use a lettering system:

- "A" for those things you are already doing here and recommitting to do in the coming year.
- "B" for things you'd like to begin in the near future.
- "F" for things that interest you, but in the immediate cannot commit to
- "I" for something that looks interesting, but you are wondering what it actually is.

We have a new Preference question at the bottom of page 1: "Do you prefer to Lead, Follow, other. And there is a side 2! Please complete side 2 as well as side 1. We are doing this during worship to help us recognize the gift of time and talent is as sacred as the gift of a monetary pledge, which we also bring forward during worship toward the end of November. When the music ends, fold your sheet in half, so it will be ready for you to place in the offering plate when it is passed during the offertory. [Readers of this sermon, this sheet is attached, it is also on our web site in an electronic form, please, fill it in and send it in, one way or the other 😊]

For now, to finish my spoken part of this sermon, we can take inspiration from Richard Foster who wrote: "In the everlasting kingdom of Christ: low is high, down is up, weak is strong, and service is power."ⁱ The power that Christ gives us to bring glimpses of heaven on earth. Even here. All of us. Amen.

ⁱ Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex, and Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, (Harper: San Francisco, CA, 1985).