

LOCALS ONLY: Fun In The Sun
Message for August 5, 2018
North East United Methodist Church
Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So, they went.

Again, he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’

“So, when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.

And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’

But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’

So, the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

-Matthew 20: 1-16

I remember when I was a teenager, driving down every weekend to 52nd street in Ocean City to hang out on the beach with my friends. Many of us had a bumper sticker on our car that said, “*Locals Only.*”



We wanted people to know we were from there, this was our home turf, our beach. Those who came to Ocean City for vacation, even though they soaked up the same sun and surfed the same waves, were, nonetheless, outsiders.

Years later, I came across the same mentality in the first church I served, Asbury United Methodist in Salisbury. Deb was talking to someone and a person's name in the congregation came up in conversation. The woman Deb was talking to responded, "*Oh, she's not a true Asburian.*" In other words, even though she attended Asbury UMC and worshipped with us, she was an outsider, for she had not been born into that church.

Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard workers to challenge us on such attitudes. He states that the Kingdom of God is like a landowner who goes out early in the morning to the market-place to hire laborers for his vineyard.

The market-place was the equivalent of the labor exchange. A man came there first thing in the morning, carrying his tools, and waited until someone hired him. The men who stood in the market-place were waiting for work, and the fact that some of them stood on until even five o'clock in the evening is the proof of how desperately they wanted it.

In Jesus' parable, the landowner went out at 6 am, and then again at 9 am, 12 noon, 3 pm, and 5 pm, which is the "*eleventh hour.*" In Palestine, the grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, and then close on its heels the rains came.



If the harvest was not gathered before the rains broke, then it was ruined; and so, to get the harvest in was a frantic race against time. Any worker was welcome, even if he could give only an hour to the work.

The workers hired at 5:00 p.m., only one hour before the work day ended, were paid the same as those hired at 6:00 a.m. that morning.



According to the world, to society, this is unfair; but, God's grace goes in opposition to that which society teaches. Grace or the unmerited love of God is offered without price. Grace is not about getting what you deserve it is about getting what you do not deserve. Like the workers hired at the eleventh hour were paid a full-days wage, that which they did not deserve, by the grace of God, we too, are given a free invitation to walk with God in this life and the next, regardless of where we have been, what we have done, or what age we are when we finally accept the gift.

God's love is NOT based on our abilities, how hard we have worked. God's love is based on who God is...on His mercy...His decision to reach out to us through His Son, Jesus.



The workers that were hired early in the morning and worked a full-day, only to receive the same wages as those who worked an hour, were furious. Upset, they say to the landowner, “*These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.*” Jesus says that the ones hired early in the day, when they saw what the eleventh-hour hires were paid, assumed they would be paid more than the “*denarius*” promised.

They weren’t upset about what they were paid; it is what they had agreed upon. They are upset because someone else got paid as much for less work. They are upset that others were blessed when they were not.

The workers hired early in the morning had entered their job, the vineyard, with a “*legal spirit*” about them. “*Equal pay for equal work.*” “*You get what you work for.*” “*The harder you work the more you get.*” These phrases ran through their minds. This is what they believed and how they saw the world working. The landowner, on the other hand, saw things differently.

Jesus’ parable challenges us to reflect, to examine ourselves, to test if we have a “*legal spirit*” about us.

There are those of us who have been Christians for years. We have helped build this church into what it is today. When someone new walks in the door, accepts Christ for the first time late in life, and begins to reach out in small ways, we may, if even for just a moment, look at them as less-deserving, judging ourselves as more devout, the church belonging more to us than them. Like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, we resent one receiving the benefits of what we have worked so hard for,

receiving the same blessings we are receiving without putting in the same amount of sacrifice.

William Barclay writes, “[The parable] *is in one sense a warning to the disciples. It is as if Jesus said to them, ‘You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian Church and fellowship very early, right at the beginning. In later days others will come in. You must not claim a special honor and a special place because you were Christians before they were. All men, no matter when they come, are equally precious to God.’*”

Barclay goes on to write, “*There are people who think that, because they have been members of a Church for a long time, the Church practically belongs to them and they can dictate its policy. Such people resent what seems to them the intrusion of new blood or the rise of a new generation with different plans and different ways. In the Christian Church seniority does not necessarily mean honor.*”

But a “*legal spirit*” can not only be thrown at others, but can be directed inward. We judge ourselves to not be “*good enough.*” So, we work harder and harder, trying to make up for past mistakes, trying to earn God’s love.



Writing about Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers, Barclay states, “*Here also is the generosity of God. These men did not all do the same work; but they did receive the same pay. There are two great lessons here. The first is, as it has been said, ‘All service ranks the same with God.’ It is not the amount of service given, but the love in which it is given which matters. A man out of his plenty may give us a gift of a hundred pounds, and in truth we are grateful; a child may give us a birthday or Christmas gift which cost only a few pence but which was laboriously and lovingly saved up for--and that gift, with little value of its own, touches our heart far more. God does*

not look on the amount of our service. So long as it is all we have to give, all service ranks the same with God.

The second lesson is even greater--all God gives is of grace. We cannot earn what God gives us; we cannot deserve it; what God gives us is given out of the goodness of his heart; what God gives is not pay, but a gift; not a reward, but a grace."

Again, this is the opposite of what society teaches us. For example, In the film, *Saving Private Ryan*, a squad of Army Rangers led by Captain John Miller (*played by Tom Hanks*) sets off deep into Normandy, France in the wake of the D-Day invasion to find and rescue a single private named James Ryan. All of Ryan's three other brothers have been killed in action on the same day, prompting military high command to demand a rescue operation to send Ryan home.

Along the way, almost everyone in Miller's squad dies trying to save Private Ryan. Captain John Miller himself is hit fatally. In one of the closing moments of the film – and the most powerful – a dying Miller whispers to Ryan, *"earn this."*

Instead of whispering to us, *"earn this,"* we hear the words of Paul, ***"Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him...in all you do, give thanks to God the Father through Jesus"*** (Romans 12:1; Colossians 3:17).

Instead of *"earn this,"* we hear, ***"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast"*** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Jesus communicates through this parable that we do NOT earn our salvation by the hours of hard work we put in. Like the vineyard workers, whether we come to Christ, whether we accept His offer, His invitation, very early in our lives as children, or late in our lives, near death, we will be given the same gift of eternal life, heaven, citizenship in the family of God. Therefore, we live a life of gratitude...trying to do, as Paul writes in Philippians, *"whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, whatever is excellent or praiseworthy"* (4:8).

Why do we do this? Not to “*earn it*,” but to give God thanks and to praise Him for the gift He has given us.

Furthermore, Jesus is sending a message to the Jews. The Jews believed that they were the chosen people and they looked down on the Gentiles. Usually they hated and despised them, and hoped for nothing but their destruction. They believed that if the Gentiles were to be allowed into the fellowship of the Church at all, they must come in as inferiors. Jesus’ parable teaches the opposite.

We must remember that it is not by works that we are saved; it is by faith alone. We can do nothing to make God love us any more and we can do nothing to make God love us any less. Let us do our jobs in the church out of gratitude for what God has already done for us and never feel we must work out of obligation or to earn God’s love. Let us never compare ourselves to others, thinking ourselves better than our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us rejoice when others benefit from the work we have done and have arrived to soak up the Son!



The parable is not done with us yet. Some of us relate to the workers hired at the end of the day. Some of us have come late to the vineyard. We are new to the faith and perhaps at times feel very small, perhaps unworthy, compared to those who have obviously been in the church for many years, who have a deep faith and intimacy with Christ. We have missed out on much. We recognize, as Spurgeon writes, “*What [we] might, if [we] had believed in Jesus, have done...for God and for the souls of men,*” BUT we have come and the Master has hired us, received us into His arms.

We will discover, if we lean in close enough to Jesus, that just like those who were hired early in the day, we are loved just as much, have just as

many gifts to offer, and we, too, have the opportunity, in whatever time we have left, to make a huge difference in the lives of others and the life of this world for Christ.

As William Barclay writes, *“When a man enters the Kingdom, late or soon, in the first flush of youth, in the strength of the midday, or when the shadows are lengthening, he is equally dear to God...In the picture of the holy city in the Revelation there are twelve gates.*



There are gates on the East which is the direction of the dawn, and whereby a man may enter in the glad morning of his days; there are gates on the West which is the direction of the setting sun, and whereby a man may enter in his age. No matter when a man comes to Christ, he is equally dear to him.”

Barclay continues, *“May we not go even further with this thought of comfort? Sometimes a man dies full of years and full of honor, with his day's work ended and his task completed. Sometimes a young person dies almost before the door of life and achievement have opened at all. From God they will both receive the same welcome, for both Jesus Christ is waiting, and for neither, in the divine sense, has life ended too soon or too late.”*

Lastly, there are some of us haven't entered the vineyard. We feel it is too late...too late...too much water under the bridge...what hope is there for me. As Spurgeon says, ***“It may be late...terribly late...years missed that you could have served God and made a difference in people's lives...It may be late...but it is not too late.”*** It is NOT too late to make the right choice. Come into the vineyard, even if it is an hour before closing.

Remember, the landowner in Jesus' parable said, ***“Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.”*** (Matthew 20:14).

Regardless of when we enter the vineyard, we should be most thankful to be hired, thankful for the gift of grace God has offered. Regardless of when we came to know Christ, what hour we entered the vineyard, we should live lives of gratitude and worship. Again, as Spurgeon writes, *“We who have come early love much because we have been spared much sinning and heartache...we who have come late love much because we have been delivered from much sinning and years of rebellion against God... Called early or late, called at midday or called at early noon, we have been called by grace alone, moved by the mighty constraints of God’s love, and will work for him till we can work no longer, and then we will praise him in glory.”*

When I look back on my life, the years of rebellion, running, the people I’ve hurt, the time I’ve spent away from God, I cannot help but to thank God that God’s love is not exclusive or limited.



I cannot help but to thank God that I’m not getting what I deserve, that His love is unfair...I cannot help but to thank God that, in the Kingdom of God, there is NO sign that reads, *“Locals Only”*.