

“Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?” (Matt. 20.15)

I’m sure you all will agree, going to the store lately can be a real shock to the pocket. Something that used to sell for less than \$5 seems so much more. \$50 used to go a long way, but now you can spend \$100 and not even fill a shopping cart. We’ve been hearing all the excuses. First the pandemic panic buying, next supply chain issues, and recently rampant inflation and many accusations of corporate greed. It’s not too hard to get angry. Maybe you’re on a fixed income and feeling squeezed on all sides. Even if you’re not on a fixed income, you can watch your buying power almost evaporate week to week. In many ways, I think, given the current state of the economy, many of us can perhaps relate to some of the servants in the vineyard described by our Lord in today’s Gospel.

This parable of Jesus, as well as the one he tells just before this one, are told in response to questions about the nature of heaven. What will heaven be like? How do we get there? One man even asks Jesus, “what good deed must I do to gain eternal life?” (Matt. 19.16). Our Gospel for today is a parable told by Jesus about a householder who went out around 6 AM to hire labourers to harvest his vine crop. The first ones in the day agree to be paid a denarius for their work – an average day’s wage for labour. It was a good, reasonable amount. The master went out later around 9 AM and saw more labourers standing around looking for work. He wanted his vines to be picked so the grapes wouldn’t spoil, so he hired them, too. He did this again at around noon and 3 PM, and hired more people. Finally, he went out around 5 PM, saw some more men standing and asked them “why haven’t you done anything today?”, they replied “because nobody hired us today.” So the master hired them, too.

It almost sounds like the master of the house hired every available labourer in his town to come pick grapes and tend the vines. At the end of the day, the owner of the vineyard told his steward to assemble the workers and pay them, from the last hired to the first. Those hired an hour ago were given a denarius, the full day’s wage, so the ones who were there from the beginning thought they would *obviously* be getting more. But they didn’t. They got the denarius they agreed to, the same as those who worked way less time that day. The workers grumbled, and that offended the lord of the house.

The denarius they got was a good day’s wage. Say \$20/hr for 12 hours of work. So, \$240. But those who worked three hours less than them, got paid essentially \$27 an hour, and the next batch, \$40/hr, the next \$80/hr, and the last batch, \$240 for one hour of work. You probably didn’t need to hear the math to make sense of that. That’s not really fair, is it? Well, they did agree to work the day for \$240, and were happy about it in the morning, but their jealousy got the better of them, the master didn’t say they’d be the highest paid of the day, the union didn’t set a collective agreement for seniority. The owner of the house, rightly, says, “is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?” My inner monologue hears the workers say, “yeah, it’s lawful but it still stinks”.

You and I can sympathize with these workers because their complaints house two ancient assumptions about working relationships: first, that those who do more should get more. And secondly, if they get more, that means I got less. The owner challenged these assumptions which offends the workers who are used to a scale of pay that is equal to work. Those who worked all day felt dishonoured and neglected because they should have gotten more than those who worked for an hour only.¹

This parable walks us along in something that sounds familiar and reasonable and then surprises us at the end. All sounded pretty normal until the pay situation, right? One commentator said, “Jesus deliberately and cleverly led the listeners along by degrees until they understood that if God’s generosity was to be represented by a man, such a man would be different from any man ever encountered.”² We call this generosity from God, *Grace*. You hear us talk about it a lot. God’s great

¹ Anthony J. Saldarini, “Matthew”, in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (2003), 1044.

² D.A. Carson, “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*... (1984), 427.

gifts, simply because they are God's, are distributed, not because they are earned, but because he is gracious. The point here is that we cannot earn a place in God's kingdom. God freely gives from his wealth because he chooses to.

Like a layered onion, we can peel back and read this parable on multiple levels: it tells us about God's abundant resources and love that is available to all; it tells us about the need to trust in God's generosity; it tells us about the requirement that all people be cared for; and it tells us that wealth is to be used well, and the using of that wealth might just be different than what we're used to seeing.

This whole parable is really, really about the Grace of God. This is not a parable about how we are all equal before God and that everything we do gets an equal reward. No. The point is that those eleventh-hour workers could have been paid a fraction of a day's wages, and lost out on a day's money to pay for food, or shelter, or medicine, or whatever else one does with a day's wage. They could have gotten next to nothing, they could have gotten somewhere in the middle, but the generosity of the owner meant they got a full day's wage even without a full day's work. In today's economy, wouldn't that be a blessing? If you couldn't find work until the end of the day and by a miracle the boss still gave you a full day's pay? What a game changer that might be. The boss didn't have to, but he did. And so it is with God. It is by his generosity alone that we are saved from our sins. He didn't have to, he doesn't have to, but he's told us that he chooses to. He sent his son to dwell among us so that the steep, steep price of our sins would be paid.

If I were to ask you, thinking about our Christian life, who are those labourers who come in at the 11th hour? We might be keen to think that 11th-hour Christians are those who accept our Lord on their deathbeds, for they have only accepted the Gospel for the twilight of their life. I would argue that we all are 11th-hour labourers. We have been invited in to work by Christ, and we do not deserve anything because we've only just barely showed up and the day's over. We could be dismissed right then and there. "Thanks for your help, see you next time!" But instead, we have been paid, and we've been paid handsomely. Since Christ was sent to die for us, he gave the most precious thing of all for us, a life – *His* life.

Today, of course, is Septuagesima, approximately 70 days before Easter. We just completely and fully finished the Christmas season with Candlemas on the 40th day. We prepared and then celebrated the early life of Jesus, his birth, manifestation, presentation, and baptism, and we're now shifting our focus to his re-birth in Glory: we're looking ahead to the cross and his resurrection. This is a massive shift from celebration into deep preparation and penance. It's so massive of a shift, that for centuries the Church has kept Gesimatide, or Pre-Lent, as a preparation to the preparation. That's where we are now. We're not yet in fasting, but we are starting to wean back. We are reminded that Lent is coming soon, so we best start to make our preparation. Septuagesima, Sexagesima, Quinquagesima, and the first Sunday in Lent itself is Quadragesima. We're counting down to Easter, all the way from day Seventy. All these are big words that won't fit into your daily 5-letter Wordle puzzle.

This shift is quite pronounced in the serious nature of the collect for today. It talks of our "just punishment" for our offences, and that we might be "mercifully delivered". We are all 11th-hour labourers in the vineyard – what hope is there for us? Over the last few weeks we have been shown our Lord's glory and know that he is truly the Son of God, so if there is any hope for us to be "mercifully delivered" from our many offences, we now look to the cross and to the empty tomb on Easter morning. That is our hope – that is our day's wage. We don't deserve to be compensated for anything, but God's grace Freely given means that we are compensated beyond what we deserve.

We are faced with so great a hurdle: the cost of our Sin is death. Today's gospel is here to remind us that every hurdle can be surmounted with Christ because of God's abundant grace, and *only* because of it. There is no finite amount of God's grace. If it seems like somebody gets more, that doesn't mean that you are getting any less. We must do the work for Him, we must answer his call and be hired at the eleventh hour, but the abundance of God far surpasses anything we could ever imagine. The richest man on earth still has less money than God has of grace. So let us not be jealous of one another, like the workers in the vineyard, but let us always thank God for what he gives us.