

"The Last and the First"
September 24, 2107
Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.

When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

And 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?'

They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When 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.'

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, '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.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The Vineyard

Today's story from the Gospel of Matthew is another example when Jesus tells a parable to explain the kingdom of heaven. What is it? What's it like? The disciples want to know. And what about God? What's God like? This parable happens in a

vineyard. Apparently, much work needs to be done in this vineyard. Perhaps the harvest is ready and it's time to pull all the grapes from the vine. The time is now. So the landowner goes out to hire workers at the beginning of the day, and they settle on the amount they will be paid. As the day proceeds, more workers are needed, so the landowner goes out and hires more hands. Five times the owner of the vineyard goes out to get more workers, all the way to the final hour of the day. When he goes out one more time and hires the remaining workers that no one else picked all day.

And then at the end of the workday everyone gets paid—the same amount. See the problem?

The Grumbling

The grumbling begins. “Not fair! Why do they get the same as us? We should get more than them for the amount of work we did. And why are they getting paid first? We work harder, and we are out in the hot sun longer. These lazy ones only come in at the end of the day. They don't deserve what we have.”

Can't say we blame them. It doesn't make much sense. A day's wage for an honest day of work should go to the ones who there from the beginning. We are not going to take kindly to anyone cutting in line. We all know the feeling when someone cuts the line. We can relate whenever anyone gets something they didn't work for hard enough. It's that agitating knot in the pit of our stomach when someone who just shows up gets recognition when we've been there the whole time following the rules and doing the work. It's what the older brother feels when the prodigal son returns home and the father throws a party for the scoundrel and lavishes him with gifts and love.

Jesus tells these parables just to show how God's grace is such a scandal! And it may even cause us to grumble.

Justice

Because it's a matter of justice. We all have a sense of what justice is; what's right and what's fair. And when something interferes with that sense of justice it triggers a reaction. So, for instance, we have an idea of who God is and what we need to do to get to heaven. We follow the rules, and we do good things. This has been the case since God was made known to humanity. But now along comes Jesus who teaches through these parables about vineyards and landowners and workers to show us that human justice and the justice of the kingdom of heaven are not the same thing.

It just doesn't seem right. It's not fair. How can it be that they get in?

“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.”

“You have made them equal to us.” That's more than a grumble made out in the middle of the vineyard. That's the heart of the issue. That's getting down to what really bothers us about this whole situation. In our world things are set up a certain way. There's an order to things. There's a societal hierarchy; and when we believe that anyone beneath us has been made equal to us, there will be trouble—especially if they don't deserve it.

All that hard work, all those long hours, all those good deeds, and here comes

Jesus and turns it all upside down with a new kind of justice that treats everyone in the vineyard the same.

Envy Kills

Envy. Our problem is when we compare ourselves to others. As humans we can be addicted to comparing ourselves to others. Then resentment grows if our sensibilities of justice are disturbed—especially if we think others have things they do not deserve.

The story of Cain and Abel is the old, very early Biblical account about the sin of envy. When Cain sees how God shows favor to his younger brother, it is envy that leads him to murder him. It's the first murder and why Abel's blood cries out from the ground, and why Cain is forced to live out the rest of his life apart from the presence of the Lord, somewhere east of Eden. Envy grows into anger, anger prompts violence, and violence ends in killing.

Envy can estrange us in our personal relationships, it can turn different people groups one against another, and it can cause countries to go to war. But it may vex us the most when we look with envy on another whom God has found and blessed with a grace that equals what was given to us. The owner of the vineyard says,

“Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

A Better Way: Give Thanks

There is a better way than envy. The good news is that God is very generous. And grace is flowing non-stop from the heart of God. In baptism we see that grace spilling into Kaia's life even when on her own she doesn't even know how to ask for it. We see it when someone comes to the realization that Jesus is who he says he is; when faith comes alive through no effort on their own. But we see it most clearly when we ourselves are invited into the vineyard. Whether at the beginning of the day or in the last hour, we are brought in whether we deserve it or not. There is a better response than grumbling. It is the antidote to envy and it celebrates the kingdom of heaven. It is the willingness to give thanks and to bless others for their good fortune.

There's a story that our friend Dottie tells of her father always wanting a Mustang. For years he looked enviously at others who drove a Mustang and he really wanted one. He was the kind of guy who gave his car names, and if he had a Mustang he would likely have given it the best name he ever came up with. But he never got a Mustang, except for the Matchbox one Dotty got him one year. And she said she had a conversation with him in his later years and said, “Dad, you never got your Mustang.”

“No, I never did. But it's ok. I can still see other people driving them and I can wish them well for their good fortune.”

The kingdom of heaven operates with a completely different system of justice than what we are used to. The first will be last, and the last will be first. Amen.