

Sermon: Matthew 20:1-16 (Proper 20A)  
18 September 2011, Christ Church Riverdale  
The Rev. Robert C. Lamborn, Rector

*The sermon is based on this Bible passage:*

**Matthew 20:1-16** “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>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?’ <sup>7</sup>They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>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.’ <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>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.’ <sup>13</sup>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? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

How do you like it when you’re standing in the checkout line at a place like the grocery store or Target, and things get backed up enough that they open another line? It’s the people behind you, who haven’t been waiting as long, who usually are the ones in position to move up to the front of the new line and check right out. It’s the same thing when you’re driving on a parkway and have to slow down for the driver ahead of you—the people behind you are out in the left lane passing before you even have a chance. Or what about when you see a great offer on a magazine you subscribe to? Then it turns out in the fine print that the offer is for new subscribers only. What about rewarding the ones who have been loyal for years? Pretty frustrating, isn’t it? And these are only minor examples.

Now imagine yourself as an unemployed man who has no way to support his family except as a day laborer, working for whomever will hire him that day. At least this time of year is good for work, though, because the grape harvest is ready, and the vineyard owners need extra workers to get the grapes in on time. So you get up early and head down to the marketplace where the hiring takes place. It’ll be a hard day’s work from sunup to sundown, but the vineyard owner offers you a denarius—a full day’s pay at the equivalent of minimum wage. Sometimes you don’t get that much for your other work. When you get out to the vineyard, you can tell there aren’t enough workers to get the harvest in, so it’s not surprising that the owner comes back with more people around nine, and noon, and three o’clock. He even comes with a few at five; they hardly have a chance to start before the workday is over.

It’s been a hard twelve hours’ work, but it was worth it, because at least your family will have a full meal tonight. Everybody’s getting paid at the end of the day, like the Torah says, but what’s this? Those guys who came at 5 o’clock are getting a whole denarius, the large silver

coin worth a day's wage! Is the manager confused about who worked all day and who didn't? Or . . . if the one-hour guys get a whole denarius, that'd be twelve for those of us who worked all day! That's two weeks' pay; not enough to make us rich, but it'd be some nice breathing room. But by the time you get to the front of the pay line, you can see that *everybody's* getting paid the same, one denarius; no mistake, just the vineyard owner's orders. It's not fair. It's not fair to you and the other folks who have worked all day, and as it becomes clear what is happening your murmuring gets louder and angrier. And the landowner has the gall to ask, "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Well, yes! Exactly! Why should we work all day when we could've slept in a little bit, or done something else today, just shown up at five and still gotten paid just as much? This is what Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like? It's not fair! But now take a minute and put yourself in the place of the workers who started later in the day. They have families to feed, too, and came to work with no idea what they'd get paid for their labors. The owner had just said, "I'll pay you what's right." What a gift at the end of the day to find out that "what's right" means a full day's pay! You won't get rich off of this, but your family can eat a good meal from it. We pray not, "Give *me* this day *my* daily bread," but, "Give *us* this day *our* daily bread." Yet in the living out it may not always feel just. The kingdom of heaven has a different economy than we do, tosses our ways of scorekeeping out the window. The vineyard owner pays not what is fair but what he believes is right; God's abundant generosity transcends our standards of what is and isn't fair.

So the kingdom of heaven is like everybody getting paid the same no matter how hard they try? It still doesn't make sense. After John Wesley preached in a certain church they disinvited him from coming back to preach again. Wesley said, "There are few matters more repugnant to reasonable people than the grace of God."<sup>1</sup>

Two kids are heading home from a birthday party and enjoying going through their gift bags:

"Hey, look; I got a lollipop!"

"Yeah, and I got some bubblegum and a pencil with a fancy eraser."

"Me too. Whoa! Look; I got a ninja toy! Cool!"

"So did I. Wait; I got two!"

"You got two? ***It's not fair!***"

And for the rest of the ride home the kid as angry and didn't enjoy anything in his gift bag.

Bottom line thinking still says that the workers who came at 5pm deserved to be paid only a twelfth as much as the ones who worked all day. In Jesus' time there was even a coin worth that much—a pondion, worth one-twelfth of a denarius. The kingdom of heaven is like not getting what we deserve but instead receiving the abundant generosity of God. And if we're honest with ourselves, we'll be deeply grateful, because in so many ways *we* are five o'clock workers, not with a claim on a valid timesheet, but with hope that God will love us anyway.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Brett Younger, "No more keeping score," *Lectionary Homiletics* (September 1999), 25.

The New Testament scholar William Countryman begins his book, *Good News of Jesus*<sup>2</sup> by summarizing that Good News in three words: “You are forgiven.” He thought about instead summarizing it as, “You are loved,” but wanted to make it abundantly clear that this good news is something we neither earn nor deserve. The five o’clock workers in the vineyard could have been paid a pondion, a twelfth of a denarius. It would have been fair, but God’s grace doesn’t divide up like that. We don’t receive the part of the love of God we deserve, but all of it!

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<sup>2</sup> Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1993. See pp. 3-5.