

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 20:1-16

When I was in seminary in Columbia South Carolina, back in the early 1990's, there on Main Street, near the capital building, in down-town Columbia, there was a place where dozens of people, usually men, but some women, would line up around 6AM each morning (Monday through Friday) to wait for someone to come by and hire him or her for a job, for the day.

Usually by 8 AM, a number of people would be hired for the day. A few hours later, another group of people would be hired, and so on and so on.

And I am sure, that in any major city, like Houston, Austin, Dallas Fort-Worth, and San Antonio, you will find the same thing, unemployed men and women lining up to wait for someone to come by, and to offer him or her a job. I have even seen a place in Bellville, just down the road from here, where men wait for someone to come by and offer them work for the day.

Perhaps some of these people who are waiting for work, will do menial labor type jobs, for the federal minimum wage, or some will work for "x number of dollars per day".

Perhaps some will take a part-time job, that might eventually lead to a full-time job. But at the end of the day, most probably don't know if there will be work for them tomorrow or not. In some ways it can be a "sad-situation."

But at least for the day, they know that they will be able to sustain their family and make it for one more night.

When we look at the parable of Jesus this morning, we see a very similar pattern in First Century Palestine, as we see in twenty-first century Columbia, South Carolina, or any other city for that matter.

The same group of workers lining up first thing in the morning looking for work for the day, this time it's at the market-place, rather than on the street in down-town Columbia, South Carolina or wherever.

In our Gospel narrative for today, the employer is a vineyard owner doing the hiring. And this time they have agreed on a wage of one denarius for the day's work, a typical day's wage for manual labor.

There is some disagreement among the biblical scholars as to just how much a denarius was worth, but it seems it was more generous than the minimum wage we have today.

So in the parable, the workers are invited by the vineyard owner to go to the vineyard to work. Hard work, especially in the heat, but work done with the knowledge that about 100.00 (or so), was waiting for them at the end of the day.

Several hours later, the vineyard owner returns to the market place and finds others who are waiting, still looking for work.

The vineyard owner hires them and tells them he will pay them, "what is fair", for their labor. The vineyard owner repeats this throughout the day, until his final trip to the market place, even as late as 5PM, when he hires the final group of workers for the vineyard.

At 6PM, the end of the work-day comes, and the vineyard owner pays the workers. The ones who had just been hired at 5PM are paid 100.00 each.

So of course, those workers who have been hard at work since early in the morning are impressed with his generosity and begin getting excited, if this vineyard owner is giving 100.00 or so, to the latecomers, surely, those who worked all day long, are in for a nice surprise!

So then, the vineyard owner pays those who worked for part of the day, 100.00 each. Those who had been working since 6AM get a little anxious.

When it is time for them to be paid, they receive the same 100.00 as everyone else! They are indignant! "Where is the fairness!" they cried out!

By the time any kid gets to kindergarten, they've got a strong sense of fairness, any six year old would tell you that it is not fair, to reward someone who has worked for 12 hours, the same as someone who worked for only one hour.

So what is the vineyard owner's response? He tells the workers that he is generous in his giving, that he rewards all who work for him equally, and that they should appreciate what they have been given rather than envious that others were given the same.

The workers in the vineyard failed to realize that the owner of the vineyard can do whatever he wants to, it's his choice to make, not theirs.

The parable doesn't tell us if those who worked all day ended up agreeing with the vineyard owner or they just continued to grumble.

So on the one side, I laid out the struggle of the day laborers in Columbia South Carolina (or any other major city for that matter), and on the other side, I described the parable of the vineyard owner.

There are a number of parallels, and the situations sound quite similar. But the day laborers in any city are in a situation, probably none of us would choose to be in, (and in fact, most of those who work day to day, say, they would prefer to be in a regular job that works regular hours and pays a regular salary instead of hoping to get hired for just the day), while the parable, here, as described by Jesus was a way to understand the Kingdom of Heaven.

Remember, Jesus used everyday images in a story like this one, to make a point to His listeners.

It is difficult to imagine how we could compare the ordeal people go through each day as they wait for, and hope for some type of work, with the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. So what is the difference?

Here is the difference, and that difference is the boss or the employer. The day laborers in Columbia South Carolina, or any other major city, for that matter, may have employers who would try to take advantage of them, or try to cheat them.

But the vineyard owner, loves them, cares for them, and provides for them. Jesus clearly placed Himself in the parable as the vineyard owner, describing all people as potential workers in the vineyard, and the denarius, as the gift of salvation, given by God.

Whether we become a Christian as a child and serve God faithfully for decades, or one becomes a Christian in one's old age, and can only serve God for only a few years before dying, our reward of salvation is the same, it doesn't change.

Because, as the parable makes clear, it is not the quality of our work in the vineyard or the length of time spent in the vineyard that earns us the denarius of our salvation, but all who make the choice to accept God's invitation in the market place, to come and to serve in God's vineyard and to accept the love and the provision, of the vineyard owner, will receive the same gift of salvation equally.

While this may not seem fair by the world's standards, we can thank God, that God, has always loved us more than we could have ever known or expected.

God has always given us more than we deserve. God always cares for all who have accepted the invitation to allow Jesus Christ into their hearts as Lord and Savior, even when we in our selfishness, and in our sinfulness, don't think that God should be so loving to those people, (you know) the ones we see as less desirable to be around.

So the message of the parable then draws our attention away from our perceived unfairness of the situation and toward the amazing grace of God, the self-giving love that God gives us to each and everyone of us.

God shows grace to us, and that isn't fair, because God's grace is much more than we deserve. Thanks be to God!

When we recognize the amazing gift of God's grace that was generously given to all who accept the invitation to come and serve God in the vineyard, the rest of the parable takes on new meaning!

Because the workers of the vineyard now know that the vineyard owner, God will be faithful in taking care of them. They have already seen God's generosity that never runs out.

They need not worry if they will work the following day, they saw God, go and recruit more workers, again and again, to come and serve in the vineyard, all were invited.

This, I believe, is the real reason that those workers who labored in the vineyard all day, were envious of those who came to the vineyard later in the day.

Those who came early, missed the joy of serving a God who loves them and cares for them, and began thinking instead, only of their reward at the end of the day.

And of course, as soon as they lost sight of the magnitude of their reward, they began thinking that they really worked hard enough to earn their own reward, to earn their own salvation so to speak, not realizing that God had given them their reward, just as much as the latecomers.

Twelve hours of hard labor in the vineyard had not earned salvation, anymore than one hour of salvation.

The reward came simply as a generous gift from the vineyard owner. The hard work in the vineyard, brought joy to those who recognized what a blessing it is, that we can serve such a gracious God.

We serve God in our daily living, not because we will earn ourselves, “more salvation”, but that, all who profess in faith, live in faith, and profess that God’s Son, Jesus the Christ came into this world as one of us, died on that Roman Cross on Calvary’s Hill, shed His holy and precious blood to atone for our sins, and on the third day, God raise Him from the dead, in a resurrection that defeated death, sin, and the devil, therefore, the gift of salvation, eternal life belongs to us. This is the gift, it is free, no more no less.

Those workers who complained, about the reward or the payment for their labor, not being fair, knew that working in the vineyard was hard work, it was not some easy job.

But folks, serving God, His Church and His people never is. These workers in the vineyard failed to recognize the magnitude of the reward they were given.

And they failed to recognize the true blessing that the work of God brings about. By God’s grace through faith you and I have been saved, by God’s grace through faith, you and I are called to be workers for the Kingdom of God.

Folks, our salvation is secure, let’s roll up our sleeves, there is much work to be done in the vineyard, let’s get going. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, You have called us from the market place to go and to work in your vineyard, whether we began our work at 6AM or at 5PM, for all who profess their faith in Christ will receive the gift of eternal life with you in your heavenly kingdom. Help us through our faith, to reach out to those who are standing idle in the market place, and to bring them into your vineyard as fellow workers in the kingdom, ready to share the generous blessings of a life of service to O’Lord. All these things we humbly pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.