

Sermon - Proper 20 - Year A
Matthew 20:1-16
9/24/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What does a person deserve for his or her labor? What are we entitled to receive from others and from God? About 1700 years after the Gospel of St. Matthew was written, Victor Hugo asked similar questions in his 1862 novel, *Les Miserables*. Perhaps you have seen the movie or the musical. The story begins in 1812 - with the convict Jean Valjean recently released after nineteen years in a French prison. Nineteen years he spends – wasting away after being charged for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving sister. Upon his release, he wanders the countryside, unable to find a place to stay because of the stamp on his passport that marks him forever as a convict. He cannot find a single place to rest, until he encounters the generosity of the humble Bishop Myriel. It is a generous servant priest who offers the convict shelter from the weather and the darkness.

After two decades of abuse, Jean Valjean cannot trust in or believe in kindness, and so he flees in the night, taking with him the bishop's valuable collection of silver. The police quickly track him down, dragging him back to the home of Bishop Myriel to convict him – this time, to return him to prison for life. When they meet again face-to-face, the victim and the doomed thief, the bishop surprises them all. He embraces the man who stole from him. He insists to the police that he gave the silver as a gift. And then not only does he insist that Valjean take the whole lot of silver, but he demands that the man take the valuable silver candlesticks as well. Valjean is not only spared from prison, but he is given a gift of extraordinary generosity: a new, fresh possibility of abundant life.

In our Gospel from St. Matthew this morning, Jesus is teaching his disciples about some similarly absurd generosity, and about the surprising contours of a similarly abundant life. For several chapters now, Jesus has been revealing how the kingdom of God will surprise us. The things that seem to bring us security in this earthly life are not the things that will get us into heaven. He presents them with this story of the landowner and the workers in the vineyard. The landowner goes out early in the morning, and hires a crew for his land. He goes out a bit later, again bringing in a group of workers. He does the same at lunchtime, and then again in the afternoon and evening, and at the end of the day, the workers are shocked to discover that they are paid precisely the same wage.

This is known as the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, but it could perhaps also be known as the parable that is particularly challenging for Americans. Most of us raised in the United States grow up surrounded by a mythos of reward for hard work. You get what you earn. If you are strong and successful, you will receive what is due. If you work for ten hours, you deserve more than the person who worked for five. Even as small children we have a sense of things being “fair” or “unfair.” It’s one of our earliest protests! “That’s not fair!” we holler at our siblings. Whether by nature or culture, we are very concerned with what other people are up to. There seems to be a sense of earthly justice somewhere inside of us, keeping us on alert for who has what and whether or not they deserve it. Most of us do not grow up learning to chase down the thief to give him our candlesticks.

And so we might struggle with this parable. Who is this landowner? Who are those laborers who got there first? Who are these lazy latecomers and why are they receiving so much money? This vineyard imagery is abundant throughout the New Testament, and we see in each of

the Gospels that a vineyard is the image Jesus uses to describe the kingdom of God. God himself is the landowner. God hires those who tend the vine, but the vine itself belongs to him.

In the early days of Christianity, the Church Fathers writing in the fifth and sixth centuries interpreted this passage to describe the expansion of God's promise of redemption. Israel and the Jewish people were the laborers hired first. The Gentiles were the latecomers. And yet, both received the same daily wage of salvation. We might also understand this parable to teach us not to worry about when a person comes to know Jesus Christ. Some of us will be baptized as infants, and others will become Christians late in life, and yet our reward - the grace of God and the promise of eternal life - will be the same.

In both cases, the heart of the message is clear: God's grace is pure, abundant, undeserved generosity. God's grace observes our petty, terrified acts of thievery and chases us down to give us the candlesticks. As God says to the prophet Isaiah, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways...For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

No matter who we are, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard is good news. Perhaps today you are the laborer first to the vineyard. You have spent your entire life responding to God's call. You have worked long and hard. You have known the sweetness of tending to God's efforts. Praise God. Your life is an extravagant gift.

Or perhaps today you are the laborer hired at the last hour. Most of us will have a season of our lives when our faith seems to have arrived late in the day. Perhaps you have felt yourself like those who have had no work, no money, no status. Praise God. He comes to you even now and bids you to come in. When you hold out your hands and declare, "I have nothing," God says, "yes, but *I have you.*"

Sooner or later, each one of us will be the latecomer to the vineyard. Sooner or later, each one of us will be like the convicted silver thief, fleeing from goodness in the night. But our good Jesus will not meet us with condemnation. He will meet us with mercy. He will insist, against all human reason, that we must take the candlesticks as well. Even on the Cross, Jesus received the confession of the repentant thief and told him, “today, you will be with me in paradise.”

In this parable we are given the generous gift of a foretaste of God’s own vision, a vineyard of the faithful who serve him and know him in the abundance of his peace. A vineyard where all are invited to pray as we did in our Collect of appointed for the morning:

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*