

Sermon For Sunday, September 20, 2026

Matthew 20:1-16

One of the “life rules” I’ve adopted as I grow older – and try to live by (always harder!) – is that “no joy comes from comparisons.”

Have you ever noticed that? Rather than be content with what you have or who you are or what you’ve accomplished, we so regularly look to those around us to decide whether it is enough based on what others have or are or have accomplished.

I suspect this is part of being human – being animated by a deep-seated insecurity that makes it difficult for us to establish some sense of ourselves apart from an external reference. And so we enjoy the car we drive...until we see a neighbor with a nicer or newer one. We are content in our relationship but wonder if the couple just down the street is happier. We love our kids but wish they could be better-rounded or more accomplished, like our best friend’s kids appear to be. We feel good about our grades until we hear about the kid who is acing all his or her classes. Or, from the reverse direction – which, for whatever reason, I experience less often – we see where someone else has made a mistake and thank our lucky stars we’re smarter than that. Or we look with a bit of derision at the unhappiness of a friend and sadly conclude it’s really his own fault and are glad we make better choices. We...

The list could go on, but you probably get the point. No joy comes from comparisons. Only envy and resentment and bitterness or, occasionally, a shallow and superficial pride because you’ve chosen to make yourself feel better by looking down on someone else. And not only do we not bring joy, but we unintentionally denigrate the actual present reality with which we have been blessed.

I’m not sure this is the very core of Matthew’s parable. In fact, I suspect that Matthew shares this parable to illustrate the heightened tension brewing between Jesus and his opponents and, perhaps, to diagnose, if not indict, their failure to accept Jesus’ wider sense of grace. But if we locate the force of this parable only in the past, then I think we miss the difficult but crucial truth it offers us today. Which is simply and painfully that more often than not

we tend to identify – perhaps unconsciously – with the laborers working all day who feel rather taken advantage of, rather than with those who have received unexpected and unmerited generosity.

There is an implicit choice posed by this parable that is available to us regularly: do we take stock of what we think we deserve or of all the things we've been blessed by that we don't deserve? Do we look for places in our lives characterized by lack and scarcity or do we name and give thanks for places of abundance. Do we reflect on what others have and we do not, or do we delight in the wonder of all that we have been given to which we had no guarantee or right to expect? Do we, in short, choose comparisons or do we choose joy?

It should be easy: no joy comes from comparisons, yet we make comparisons all the time out of insecurity. So what do we do? Here are a few practical suggestions.

1) Count your blessings. Simple but powerful. Start each morning in prayer by naming two things for which you are grateful. Start your day, that is, anchoring yourself in generosity for the actual reality you have been given rather than comparing it to some idea or possibility or mirage.

2) Take a social media Sabbath at least once a week and turn our devices off an hour before bedtime. It is easier to do than you think. Rockway Mennonite School where my nephews attend and their mother Sara works took on a school wide project. All students were to put their cell phones and technology away for a week. You can imagine the interest. Sara was interviewed on CBC all day long. It was a success. The kids realized they didn't really miss technology.

Social media is driven by inviting you to keep in touch with – and, ultimately, always check in with and on – how everyone else you know is doing. Connectivity turns so quickly into comparisons, and we forget that the pictures and profiles offered are often somewhat artificial, as we all try to compose a “self” that will impress others. One day a week away from social media can help clear and refresh your mind and spirit and turning off the device at night helps ensure you don't go to sleep with these comparisons on your mind.

3) Practice vulnerability. So much of our culture invites us only to show what is strong and successful and put together (again, amplified by social media).

Yet each of us has broken places; each of us has experienced loss and disappointment; each has moments of fear as well as hope. I think we live at a time – and perhaps it's always been this way – that we are afraid of showing those parts that while they are broken or messy, are also real. (Sometimes I think our broken places are the most real, most human.) But if we can stop pretending and offer our true selves – that is, be vulnerably honest – we might find others willing to do the same. And it's hard to set up denigrating comparisons when you're being real with each other.

Remember that the main messages of this parable are:

1) God gives enough. Each of the workers received a day's wage. Some labored all day...just as they had signed up to do. Others labored for just an hour. But at the end of the day, they *all* received just what they needed: enough. (Think of the petition, "give us this day our *daily* bread.") God gives enough, and enough is something over which to rejoice.

2) God does not give up but keeps looking to find and save all. The landowner in the parable keeps going out – all day long! – in order to find more and more people to labor in the vineyard. He will not stop. Just so, God will not give up on seeking out the lost, the vulnerable, all who are in need, all of us.

Amen.