***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

Matthew 20:1-16 Rev. Tyler Amundson October 18, 2020

***The One With The Essential Wine Workers***

Matthew 20:1-16

Common English Bible

**Workers in the vineyard**

**20**“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2**After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2020:1-16&version=CEB#fen-CEB-23792a)] he sent them into his vineyard.

**3**“Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. **4**He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ **5**And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. **6**Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

**7**“‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

**8**“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ **9**When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. **10**Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. **11**When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, **12**‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’

**13**“But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? **14**Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. **15**Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ **16**So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

One of the leaders in ministry that got me into this gig of leading churches loves to share the story I am about to tell. It is for him one of the defining stories of his ministry and I in turn consider it one of the foundational tales of why I chose to lead people into following Jesus.

**The Star Thrower**

**A man was walking on the beach one day and noticed a boy who was reaching down, picking up a starfish and throwing it in the ocean.  As he approached, he called out, “Hello!  What are you doing?”  The boy looked up and said, “I’m throwing starfish into the ocean”.  “**

**Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” asked the man.  “The tide stranded them.  If I don’t throw them in the water before the sun comes up, they’ll die” came the answer.**

**“Surely you realize that there are miles of beach, and thousands of starfish.  You’ll never throw them all back, there are too many.  You can’t possibly make a difference.”**

**The boy listened politely, then picked up another starfish.  As he threw it back into the sea, he said, “It made a difference for that one.”**

Now, I have a hard and fast rule usually. I try not to spend my sermons explaining the stories I tell. However, this is 2020 and I think God has shown us that rules about how things should go are pretty much up to change.

This story about the starfish thrower has always held a special place in my heart to help me understand why in ministry serving the one person is more important that serving a lot of people. It has been for me a reminder of grace, grace means making it matter to that one. This story echoes with parables like the one lost sheep or the lost coin. Both tales of the main character absurdly searching after a single sheep or a specific coin.

Always in those parables and this one I associate the main character as God. However, there is a reason the starfish story became part of my foundational stories of sharing God’s love…I could see myself in the boy.

Perhaps at times when we hear the stories of God’s grace, like the stories of Jesus we have been hearing, we assign the roles of the characters to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit too quickly. Perhaps we for reasons of hoping God is in our life or for reasons of not wanting to grasp the reality that God gives us the power to change the world…we take a back seat and try to write ourselves out of the story of Grace. Instead perhaps we should pay attention to how grace is tapping us on the shoulder.

Our parable today from the gospel of Matthew involves some essential wine workers, vineyard workers and a micro-managing land owner.

Let’s recap this parable, to make sure we are all clear on what has happened here. We open onto a marketplace to which a landowner is out getting workers to come to his field. Upon finding workers he offers to pay one “denarion.” Now according to my study that is the equivalent to a solid living wage pay for a day. The workers would have been thrilled. They weren’t getting short changed, and they would be able to feed themselves, and their family. It was enough for one day.

These first set of workers go to the field.

Then later the landowner goes, mid-morning and invites more workers to come to the field. No mention of pay here.

Then in the afternoon he goes back to the marketplace and is like, “What are you all still doing here?” To the left over workers this question must have seemed odd, “No one hired us, of course.”

To which the landowner doesn’t say, “Well your resumes must be awful.” He just says, “Come on, we can use the help.”

Alright so you have workers that started first thing in the morning, some hired about 9am and some hired later in the day.

Then the end of the day comes and I love this artwork by [Patrick Paearz de Wet](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Patrick_Paearz_de_Wet&action=edit&redlink=1), all the people come together somewhere at this vineyard. I love thinking about the variety of people this landowner has called together.

Then the pay starts, and I love it because the landowner who went and got the people now has his manager pay people. Doesn’t want to hear what is after the pay. Those who got to the field last get, one denarian, a great wage for a whole days work. The people hired in the morning are thinking, great I will get more than my fill for the day. Then the people hired mid-morning get on denarian, hum. What is this about. Then the early morning workers who are anxious by this point get….one denarian. They all get the same pay.

This painting by Rembrandt is my favorite interpretation of what happens next.

The people start to complain, and I think Rembrandt wants to capture this. Because it isn’t to the manager the landowner returns. The people say, “This isn’t fair some of us worked harder and longer. We deserve more pay than the later in the day workers.”

The landowner responds in what seems like a brush off by a wealthy person, especially if don’t know that a denarian will get you by easily for a days wage. Instead perhaps we should know and recognize the final line, “the last will be first and the first will be last.”

Jesus is attempting to place us in the story of the kingdom and for a first century audience their attention would have been captured.

This landowner is eccentric, and has a relationship most people would see as odd with the people he hires. He has a manager, why not send him.

Now, as I have said many people quickly make God the landowner and us the workers. But, let’s not write ourselves out of the story just yet. We could be any of these roles.

The manager delivering unpopular news that appears unfair, the landowner who is intriguingly employing people throughout the day, or we could be the workers.

In the 90s sitcom friend's there is a series of engagements where the seeming un-intelligent by practical standards Phoebe engages in a debate with Ross the college professor. The debate is whether evolution is real or not. Ross works tirelessly to prove Phoebe wrong. Even brining home suitcases with fossils. To which Phoebe responds, “Isn’t there just a small possibility you could be wrong.”

Ross packs up his box and walks away. After he leaves, Phoebe says, “That was fun.” She didn’t not buy evolution, so much as she wanted Ross to think differently.

Jesus through the parables is inviting us to think differently. That is why it is dangerous to quickly write ourselves out of the script or type cast ourselves too quickly.

I have a friend named Jerry who used to run a homeless ministry in Civic Center Park in Denver. He tells this story.

﻿A while back, a man and his son were in line. This is actually pretty rare. Even though families are the largest growing segment of the homeless population, most of the folks we deal with in the park are what is often referred to as chronically homeless. They are a lot of guys who look probably like the picture in your head: unkempt, dirty, dressed in old clothes, and in some cases, smelly. You know, the kingdom of God. Anyway, this guy in front of the father and son got out of line, came over to me, pulled me aside, and said, “Hey man, are you cool if this guy and his son go to the front of the line? This kid shouldn’t have to wait.” I told him that I needed to check with the other guys in line. I asked them, “Hey all, are you cool if we let this guy and his son scoot up to the front?” Like Moses parting the Red Sea, these guys all silently took a step back and let the man and his boy walk by them to the front. As they did, I heard one of the guys say to the man next to him, “That’s a shame, man. That kid didn’t ask to be homeless.” Few of them did. I rarely have been so proud of the guys.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Homeless men as the landowners is the perhaps of this story. Who would have written this population into that role? God’s grace.

Local churches have to consider this scripture, because the new person in the door may be the one who brings the new talent needed for ministries that have long since decayed. Perhaps enough resources to the new person, is important that all the resources to the long time member.

Perhaps even more we need to consider changing our handout policies in church to have a list of work items and we employ those looking for a handout, and pay them a wage that would get them a home and meal if they kept working with us.

How are we written into the character roles by this story to help make God’s kingdom?

Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber invites us to consider this about this parable as she shares what made a difference in her life, was not a mega-church pastor a mega-landowner, but humble leaders called by God from marketplace.

*What makes this the kingdom of God is not the worthiness or piety or social justicey-ness or the hard work of the laborers…none of that matters. It’s the fact that the landowner couldn’t manage to keep out of the marketplace. He goes back and back and back, interrupting lives…coming to get his people.****Grace tapping us on the shoulder****…And so, I reminded those seven pastors specifically, including the man who introduced me to grace, that the kingdom of God was just like that exact moment in which sinners/saints are reconciled to God and to one another…In the end, their calling, and their value in the kingdom of God comes not from the approval of a denomination or of the other works, but in their having been come-and-gotten by God. It is the pure and unfathomable mercy of a God that defines them and that says, ‘pay attention, this is for you.”*

So, how will you build the kingdom? Will you be the landowner tapping people on the shoulder, or tossing the starfish back into the ocean? Will you be the worker who complained about fairness, or accepted the gift? Will you be called to be the unpopular manager or prophet letting people know the kingdom is about enough, not fair?

Go and reread this parable this week, and consider what character God is calling you to be as we help build up the kingdom of heaven.

1. Herships, Jerry. Last Call: From Serving Drinks to Serving Jesus (Kindle Locations 1854-1862). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)