

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
September 20, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.' 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? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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Christian interpreters of today's gospel reading have been, for centuries, quick to turn the parable of "The Laborers in the Vineyard" into allegory - imagining the landowner as a stand-in for God, the vineyard as the world, and the early and late workers as either those who followed Christ early in his career or those who came later to the faith. Other commentators equate the workers who were hired early in the day with the Jews and the Law, and those who came later with Jesus' followers and his opposition to legalism.

A socialist perspective might equate the landowner's decision to pay everyone equally, regardless of how long they had labored that day, as support for one of the underpinnings of Marxist thought, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

And I'm willing to bet that this morning our Lutheran brothers and sisters are using this parable as an opportunity to talk about grace, regarding the landowner's policy of paying everyone equally as an example of how salvation isn't dependant on how hard we work, or how much good we do, but on the benevolence of the Father.

I would like for us to look at this parable from a different angle, a fresh perspective, without the insight, and baggage, of a lifetime of Sunday school and pulpit musings on a complex passage, and put ourselves in the sandals of the average peasant in the crowd who listened to Jesus' tale that afternoon in the region of Judea, beyond the Jordan, 2000 years ago. Let's give him a name, Jeremiah, the day laborer.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." Immediately Jeremiah thinks this is odd. As an occasional worker in the vineyards, he knows that the landowner would typically send his manager to the marketplace to hire day laborers. Because if a man owned a vineyard, he was wealthy, almost by definition. He had either inherited the vineyard, or put together a number of smaller plots of land previously used for grain production. And a landowner must wait at least four years for the vineyard to produce grapes. Only a rich man could afford such a long-term investment. What was this man, dressed in the soft fabrics of the wealthy, with rings on his smooth fingers, and light skin unaccustomed to exposure to the sun, doing in the marketplace - when he could be expected to still be lounging in his soft bed as such an early hour?

And Jesus said, "After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard." This arrangement was familiar to Jeremiah. The usual daily wage was the denarius, the amount that a man, working sunup to sundown in the fields, could be expected to be paid for his labor. It was enough to buy food for his small family, for that day alone. It bought little else, and since he couldn't count on employment everyday, his children often went hungry.

The landowner's repeated trips to the marketplace, at 9, noon, 3, and 5 seemed unusual to Jeremiah as well, but he had occasionally seen the practice, when the harvest was bountiful, and the fruit in the vineyard ripened all at once, and the landowner didn't want to miss a single grape.

Jeremiah could have predicted the answer to the landowners disparaging question to the final batch of workers in the marketplace, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' Too many days, he too had stood idle in the marketplace, waiting for someone to hire him, after younger and stronger men had been chosen ahead of him. He could recall a time when he worked everyday, tilling the small tired plot of land that his father had left him. But the Roman occupiers demanded more taxes than he could pay, so they took his land and sold it to a rich man, who could make it more productive. And Jeremiah was reduced to an economic status less secure than that of a slave.

It also didn't escape Jeremiah's notice that the landowner made an agreement with the workers hired at daybreak to pay them, "the usual wage". But by mid-morning and at noon, the landowner only promised to pay the workers, "what

was right”, that is, what the landowner thought was right. And toward the end of the day, understanding that the workers hired at 5:00 pm were imagining the hunger gnawing in their children’s bellies, he could see why they wouldn’t even ask about their wage and would simply follow the landowner’s order that they march into the vineyards.

And at sundown the manager handed out the pay and all received the same small silver coin and the early workers grumbled at the injustice of it. Jeremiah had seen this kind of thing before. Worker pitted against worker, slave versus day-laborer, field boss against field hand, the strong and the weak competing against one another for a job that wouldn’t adequately feed any of their families. And when they complained, the landowner tried to settle them down and Jeremiah notices that he calls them “friend”, but not using “phile” the Greek word for friends of the same social status, but “hetaire”, a condescending term for friend, something like, “little buddy”.

And just to make the arrangement of power and wealth clear to all listeners, the vineyard owner announces to the complaining workers, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” Underscoring the privilege of the economic elite.

And so, at the end of the parable, when he hears Jesus say, “So the last shall be first and the first shall be last,” Jeremiah must have envisioned, not the day laborers jostling to avoid being the last chosen, but the vineyard owner himself stationed at the end of the line.

It’s not so hard to imagine the average 21st century worker having a similar reaction to the parable. Now, as then, wages are stagnant. Unemployment is high. Unorganized workers are voiceless against the existing political and economic power structure. Wealth is concentrated like never before. All of you have heard, your entire lives, that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, but it is especially true now, in ways none of us have ever known. The interests of the educated are pitted against the uneducated, union member against nonunion member, the unemployed against the employed, salaried versus hourly workers, while all along real wages have declined for decades while corporate profits and CEO compensation skyrockets upward. Something was rotten in first century Judea and something is rotten now.

I’m intrigued by the denarius. It was the usual daily wage mentioned in today’s parable, and in last Sunday’s gospel reading about forgiving debt, and was used to measure the cost of the perfume that Mary used to anoint Jesus’ feet. The denarius was a very small silver coin, typically imprinted with the image of the Roman emperor. It was the standard by which the typical peasant could measure the value of a single day of his life. Jesus came of age in a system in which most people had little value outside of what labor they could provide to support

the Roman Empire. Each day the average peasant sold himself for a single denarius.

How cheaply we sell ourselves. In the kingdom of God a person's worth cannot be measured in denarii or dollars. Are we going to lineup at the marketplace and willingly sell our lives, one day at a time? Or can we step out of line, and recognize the divine spark that lies within us. The spark that glowed so brightly within the Christ, that his followers recognized that he was the Son of God.

Sometimes Jesus used parables to call his follower's attention to an unjust system that creates and perpetuates poverty and human suffering. In the end, when injustice prevails, we all suffer, rich and poor alike. Those who live in poverty, those whose focus in life must be on the daily wage, the single denarius, can be so overwhelmed by their struggle for mere existence, that the divine spark within them, is nearly extinguished. And the rich can allow their own sense of privilege and superiority and abundance to so fill their lives, that they perceive no need to open themselves to the ultimate generosity of God's love.

Early or late, rich or poor, the kingdom of heaven awaits our awakening.