

Pastor Jon's September 24, 2023 Sermon

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard: based on Matthew 20:1-16

For some reason, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is a favorite of mine. It speaks of the extravagant grace of God for people who don't seem to deserve it or earn it. Isn't that all of us? Who can merit the grace of God? It is all a gift.

It also challenges our human ideas of fairness when it comes to God's grace. That's why we call this a kingdom parable. The kingdom of God is like...

The parable reminds me of a parishioner I had in Oregon named Mike Erdman. Mike was an entrepreneur and commercial fisherman. He looked like the guy on the Gordon's Fish Sticks packages.

Weatherworn face, gray beard, bald head. He developed a method to catch eels and a way transport them alive to Asian countries. Before he died, he gave me a t-shirt he wore one day when I visited him. It said, "Jesus said to go fishing."

Right around December, the Dungeness crab season would commence. Mike and a partner owned a crab processing plant where boats would bring their crab to be weighed and processed. Mike needed a lot of seasonal workers. I met a man at church who was incarcerated but recently released. He had a hard time finding a job. I knew Mike hired people with criminal records and told him to check it out. He applied and got the job. Mike told me they were some of the best workers... because they appreciated the work. Mike also told me he wanted to give people a good Christmas. Mike reminds me of the gracious landowner.

This parable gives people fits, however... because we don't think it's fair that the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers got paid the same as the 1<sup>st</sup> hour workers who had to endure the heat of the day. What is Jesus up to here?

Let's first look at the crazy Landowner. He had a job to do. He had to harvest his vineyard. He had to get those grapes off the field pronto in order to make the best wine. So he went to the marketplace where all

the day laborers gathered. And he went multiple times. The work day started at 6AM and ended at 6PM. I saw this in Guatemala when I was there on our From Houses to Homes build. It was mostly the men who would gather in the morning hoping to get work for the day to feed their families. Some would get picked for a job right away while others had to wait. Imagine waiting all day and returning home with nothing to show for?

In the parable, the landowner had compassion for those who had to wait all day. He didn't want anyone to stand around idle. Mary Gordon in her book Reading Jesus discussed the landowner, "All he cares about is that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage. The capacity to go home and feed a family. Sufficient security and peace of mind to sleep well. A solid grasp on hope. A reliable sense of accomplishment, belonging, and dignity."

This landowner sounds like our God... wanting dignity and abundant life for all.

There is something about this landowner that is different from our world... this is always keeping score. He is overly generous to those who only worked 1 hour. When he hired the first hour workers, they agreed on the usual daily wage. When paying them last, they were thinking we will surely get more. But they got the same. Then they grumbled and complained against the landowner. The landowner retorts, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Jesus may have been advocating for the tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes who became his followers and served God later in life. Possibly the Gentiles who came to the party later. Regardless, Jesus wanted everyone to be loved and accepted in his community.

For us, we really need to look at the landowner's compassion and generosity to the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers. The landowner wanted people to eat and have their basic needs met. He wanted people to work and have dignity. The landowner is our God who has compassion for all, those new to the faith and cradle Christians. It reminds me of communion. Maybe you had a good week and didn't sin as much as

normal. Maybe you had a rough week. When we take communion, we are all equal. We come with open hands begging for God's grace.

Finally, one would think that long costly service for Jesus should qualify you for a higher rate of pay in the kingdom heaven.

But we all must humbly acknowledge that we are like the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers. None of us can merit the glorious future that God has prepared for us. It is all a gift.

So instead of begrudging God's generosity in the parable, we should embrace it and try to imitate it. We should celebrate with all who come to faith regardless of the timing or their past.

In the meantime, timing the market on a relationship with Jesus isn't the point of the parable. Following Christ and believing in him is abundant life now. Who wouldn't want to work every day in Christ's vineyard?