

**The 16th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 20, 2020
PROPER 20**

The Lessons: Isaiah 55:6-9
 Psalm 27:1-9
 Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30
 Matthew 20:1-16

The Hymns: # 549 (1,3,7) *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*
 # 655 (1-3) *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word*
 # 704 (1,3,4) *Renew Me, O Eternal Light*

The Collect: Lord God, heavenly Father, since we cannot stand before You relying on anything we have done, help us trust in Your abiding grace and live according to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon:

“Wages and Gifts”
 Matthew 20:1-16

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.”

Dear Friends in Christ,
 Seems that people today are always complaining about the high cost of services. The wages of plumbers, electricians, carpenters – so expensive just to maintain your home.

And what about those professional athletes? Their salaries are ridiculous. So are the salaries of our television entertainers. And those CEOs are making so much money today!

If you want to get people upset very quickly in today’s world, all you have to do is begin talking about salaries. We often play the game of comparing our salary to someone else’s salary. You might call it the “size up our salary” game. When we play that game, we usually compare our wages with a person who is making more money than we are. They’re making more money and they seem to have less skill and education. Then we become upset, but usually don’t say anything. But how we simmer inside!

That’s the way we normally play the “size up the salary” game. Money, salaries, equal pay for equal work: these words can cause all kinds of tensions within us. It is with this tense and conflictive mood that we approach the parable for Jesus for today. Jesus’ parables are never about church. Not one parable of Jesus is about church. Not one parable is about candles, canticles or choirs. Not one of his parables is about preaching, pews, or processions. Jesus’ parables are from everyday life. They are from the market place, the farm, the family. Well, today’s parable is about salaries, wages, and a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. Today’s parable is about the pocket book, the billfold, the daily or hourly income.

People always get tense, anxious and nervous when you talk about money, salaries, and income. In the story for today, once again Jesus uses every-day, common life experiences. What was the dominant farm crop in Israel at this time? Grapes. And so, Jesus would tell a story about harvesting grapes. The story goes like this: There was this man who was an owner a vineyard and he needed workers to harvest his grapes. He went to the village square at six o'clock in the morning and hired workers who went out and worked all day for twelve hours until six at night. A twelve-hour day, from six in the morning until six at night.

Next, some workers were hired at nine o'clock in the morning and they worked for nine hours. Those who came at noon worked for six hours; those at three o'clock for three hours; and those who came late in the afternoon at five o'clock worked one hour. They worked merely for one hour and you know what? The owner of the vineyard gave them a full one hundred dollars for a full day's wage. Those early birds and industrious people, who had worked all day, from six o'clock in the morning, for the full twelve hours under the heat of the sun, those workers were angry that the latecomers received the same wage.

That makes sense to me. Wouldn't you get mad if you have been working so hard all day long and someone else comes in and does a little bit of work and they get the same wage as you who worked so hard all day long? Doesn't that make you mad when you are at work? When you are putting in the time, doing all the work, and someone else near you is sloughing off, and they get the same salary. Doesn't that make you mad?

The workers in the vineyards didn't stop to figure out the meaning of the parable because they were so upset about the story itself. What is the purpose of this story of Jesus? The parables of Jesus are always earthly stories with heavenly meanings. So, what is the heavenly meaning of this earthly story for today?

The key to the story is the contrast between those who came at the last hour and those who came at the first hour. Those who came at the last hour were given a full day's wage. Those who were given a full day's wage at the last hour felt that their wage was undeserved, unearned and a wonderful gift from the owner. The wage was a gift, a surprise, a wonderful delight. And there are Christians who feel that God's generosity to them is unearned, undeserved, and they are surprised at the generosity of God. Such Christians have this attitude that life has been a wonderful gift from God such as these workers who came to work for only one hour and had received a full blessing from God.

Meanwhile, there are other religious people who were there at six o'clock in the morning and they worked all day long. They were born into the Christian faith; they were baptized into the Christian faith; they went to Sunday School; they went to Youth Group; they did confirmation; they worked in the Altar Guild; they sang in the church choir; they served on the church council; they came to church every Sunday. And they knew in their hearts that God owed it to them. They had the inner attitude: if anyone deserved to be blessed by God they did, for they had been faithful to God and his church all of their lives. "God, I deserve your blessing. I have earned your blessing because of my faithful behavior to you and the church throughout the years."

So, this parable is one of the many contrast parables and teachings of Jesus. Jesus said you who come in last but have an attitude of thanksgiving shall be first, but those who think they are first

shall be last. Tell me, what did you do yesterday to deserve being given the gift of life today? What did you do yesterday that was so good that you deserved to live today? To wake up, brush your teeth, have breakfast, see your family, come to church, being with nice people: what did you do yesterday on Saturday that you deserved to be alive on Sunday? This life we live, the abundant life, and eternal life are free gifts of God to us, and we do nothing to deserve or earn them.

Jesus tells many stories that contrast. For example, the prostitutes and the Pharisees. Jesus liked and appreciated the prostitutes – not because of their profession, but because they were often victims, trapped in a lifestyle they couldn't easily escape. Jesus cared about those people, especially those who had grown up on the streets and had been abused by other people. These women were surprised that Jesus had such affection and love for them. Down deep in their emotions, they knew they did not deserve such love. The Pharisees, on the other hand, knew that they deserved God's blessings and love. They knew the Old Testament backward and forward; they tithed; they observed all the special worship services; they were in their synagogues every Friday night. They thought they deserved the blessings and honor from God.

Another contrast. The one leper and the other nine lepers. All ten lepers were healed. Only one came back and said to Jesus, "Thank you for healing me. I did not deserve your healing. You were so gracious in healing me, a great sinner. I am surprised that I am well." The other nine lepers said, "Glad that we are healed. We need to go home and see what is happening around the house. We expected healing, and it happened to us. Back to home. Back to work." Healing was no big deal to the nine lepers. Today we find similar attitudes when people say, "I have good health insurance. Good doctors. Good medical care. I am part of a healing world." They experience healing but show no appreciation to God for the miracle of healing given to them.

Another contrast. The tax-collector and the Pharisee. The tax-collector, who gets down onto his knees and prays up to God, saying, "I don't deserve your forgiveness. What I have done is wrong. Please God, give me your forgiveness and your Presence." On the other hand, there is the Pharisee who says, "I have been attending synagogue all my life. God, I appreciate your forgiveness. I know you are in the forgiveness business. It is no big deal to you. I have heard about your forgiveness all my life and I am expecting your forgiveness."

Another contrast. In the parable of younger brother and older brother. The younger son who had run away to the far country. "O Father, I sinned greatly, ran away, consumed your inheritance, and now am coming home. I deserve nothing. ... What? You are killing the fatted calf for me? Celebrating that I have come back to you?" The older brother felt this way: "Father, I have stayed home with you my whole life. I am a loyal son who has done what you wanted me to do. I expect your blessing."

Another contrast. The sheep and the goats. The sheep. "Why did I get into heaven? What did I do to deserve this gift? Your gift of eternal life is such a surprise?" God says, "Well, you were kind to those in prison, the hungry, the homeless, the stranger." The sheep: "I don't know about that. I don't know why I am in heaven. I am so surprised that I am here." The goats said: "We were good all of our lives. We gave money to world hunger and supported orphans in Africa. We deserved to go to heaven. What is this about departing from me, you evildoers. I was not an evil doer."

In so many of Jesus' stories there is this contrast between these people and those people. These people who understand that all of life and forgiveness, the abundant life and the eternal life, that all of this is a gift from God, undeserved, unearned and a surprise. And those people have the attitude that I expected it, that I deserved it, that I earned it. Pay me my full day's wage!

Jesus told this great story about this wine grower who had to get some workers. He got the first set of workers at six o'clock in the morning and they worked all day in his vineyards. There were others who came at five o'clock in the afternoon and they worked for only one hour and the owner gave a full day's wage of one hundred bucks. Those who received the money were surprise, amazed and pleased with the gift to them. Those who worked all day grumbled at the owner's generosity. I love the story. Do you understand this riddle of the kingdom of God? I think you do. Years have gone by and I have been a pastor for a long time now. When I started in the ministry, I had a lot more hair and was many pounds lighter. My body was healthier then than today. The years have gone by, and I know this for sure: that everything in my life is a gift from God. Absolutely everything. My wife, my family, my work, my friends. Life, the abundant life, eternal life. Of this I am sure: that everything is a gift. What a surprise at the end of the day! To have freely received it all! Thanksgiving Day will soon be upon us, but every day can and should be a day of thanksgiving for the undeserved gifts of our loving, heavenly Father. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.