

Working In God's Vineyard
Pentecost 17
September 24, 2023
Matthew 20:1-16

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today's service, as you have probably noticed by now, has a definite harvest theme. The Gospel lesson which serves as our text is a harvest story. It tells of the owner of a vineyard whose grape crop is ready for harvesting. He urgently needs workers to bring in the grapes before they spoil on the vine. So he goes looking for workers who will go and work in the vineyard.

Whenever the Bible uses "harvest" images and when Jesus tells parables about the harvest, God is reminding us of the great harvest of souls which are to be received into the heavenly kingdom. In fact, that's how Jesus begins his parables by saying: "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." Every generation of believers is called upon to work in the harvest field — to sow the seed of God's Word, to water and to till the soil, to nurture and nourish in the faith, and thus to participate in bringing a greater harvest of souls into the granaries of heaven.

Our Lord is so concerned about growth and harvest that he calls us to be workers in his vineyard. What kind of a worker are you? Are you one of those who were hired early in the morning? That describes many of us, doesn't it? We were called into the kingdom at a very early age, in infancy, when by God's grace we were made members of His family and enrolled in the great work of witnessing our faith in the world. We have been working for a long time in our Father's kingdom. Now, you don't have to be a pastor or deacon to do this kind of work. The laborers are ordinary people who want to work. By the lives we live and the love we share, we witness to the Love of our Savior who gave His life that we could live forever.

Some were called a little later in the day, perhaps when they were youth. Maybe it was at Vacation Bible School or at a Church camp. Perhaps it was in a youth group where they were accepted and loved by some of Christ's people and that love drew them out of the market place of worldly confusion and uncertainty and into the vineyard where they, too, engaged in the great task of the heavenly harvest. And the family grew.

Others were called later in life, at mid-day, perhaps. They had been waiting to discover a purpose in life, an understanding of life that would make sense of the world around them. Maybe it was after some kind of crisis in their life — a miscarriage, a divorce, a death or tragedy or some other event that had left them reeling. But then, the seed of God's word was planted in their heart — by a loving, Christian friend, perhaps, or by a relative of theirs who had been working for years to shine Christ's light into their dark lives. And that seed grew and they, too were called to work in the vineyard. And the family grew some more.

Still others were called late in the day. It would have been easy for the owner to just let them be. After all, the day was almost over. But no, even though there was only one hour left to work, the owner wanted them to work too. That fact demonstrates two important truths. First, it shows the urgency of the harvest. The grapes are precious and the time is now. Souls are precious to God. Tomorrow may be too late. The time to make God's love in Christ known to hurting souls is

right now. The second truth we see here is the owner's great concern for the workers. They needed work to support their family, so he summons them to work also.

Some people do become Christians in their old age or toward the end of their life. We sometimes hear stories of deathbed confessions — individuals to have rejected the Lord and His love all their life long only to have a change of heart at the last moment. Death can do that. Our world tries to make a friend of death, tries to get us to look at death as a great deliverer from suffering at the end of life. That's why so many people advocate assisted suicide and euthanasia. But death is not a friend. It is our ancient enemy. And when we realize that death is the true wage we deserve because we have lived a life of disobedience to God, we can see that here is God's ultimate punishment for our sin.

When faced with the reality of a life of separation from God and the prospect of eternal separation in hell, some will be receptive to the Good News that Jesus Christ has conquered death and the grave and that by faith in Him, they too can have the assurance of that great victory.

Now, the point of Jesus' parable is what happens at the end. When those hired first realize that they will receive the same wage as those hired at the end of the day, they grow jealous. Now, this is a very true-to-life situation. How do you feel about those who have received more recognition or more benefits and rewards than you? How do we feel about professional athletes making more in one game than we can make in one year? It's so natural to become jealous of the blessings and joys of others. It's so natural to grow bitter at the apparent inequities of life. And by saying "it's natural", what I mean is, "it's true to our human nature".

Our fallen human nature is quick to become jealous and resentful. Our fallen human nature knows when we've been slighted. It knows when others receive what we think should be rightfully ours. Now the truth is, those who worked the longest really were not slighted at all. They had agreed with the owner for an honest day's wage. That was fair. But when they saw the other laborers who had only worked one hour receive the same wage they had received, their fallen human nature was quick to take notice.

The owner hit the nail on the head when he said to them: "Are you envious because I am generous?" How generous God is! How generous he has been to me — giving me my body and soul, eyes and ears, my reason and all my senses. He has also given me food and clothing, house and home, wife and children, possessions of all kinds — so generous. He protects me from all danger and guards me from every evil. And yet how quickly I grow resentful when I begin to compare my possessions and my life with that of others whom I think are more blessed!

It is the Gospel that enables us to see that God's greatest blessing is our forgiveness and our eternal life that was purchased for us through Jesus' death and resurrection. That treasure is what puts all earthly treasures into their proper perspective. How important is it ultimately if I have many possessions or just a few? How important is it ultimately if I have less saved up for retirement than my neighbor? When God's gift to me is the assurance of His eternal love, then I can live with less. In fact, I can be content with what He gives me in this life. I need not covet because my Savior has promised to give me all I need. I need not grow jealous because He blesses me with what is truly beneficial.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ changes us from people sick with jealousy to people who will gladly work for love, the love God has provided in Christ. My friends, let us not grow jealous of one another, but by the Gospel's power, let us work together in the Lord's vineyard. The harvest is ready and we are eager to grow by His grace. Let us work together, side by side, growing as a loving Christian family in Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.