

Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Philippians 1:20-24, 27; Matthew 20:1-16

The Kingdom of God as Family

Some things to consider with the gospel story this morning...

at that time, the whole day was divided into 4 parts (or watches) for night time and 4 parts (or hours) for day time. The first hour is at dawn, the third hour is about 9:00 AM, the sixth hour is about noon, the ninth hour is about 3:00 PM.

Day laborers did not actively seek employment like we would today. There was no unemployment office available to them. They gathered with their tools at the market in the hope to be hired. Being hired was considered a privilege. During Jesus' time, harvest time was most hectic since the grapes had to be harvest as fast as possible before the rain came, which would ruin all the unharnessed grapes; a householder would need to hire workers.

One denarius was the lowest wage for a day of labor - it would not leave a man and his family much of a margin to live on. Those who were still waiting till the eleventh hour were desperate for work to feed their families.

The landowner discussed the wage to be paid to the workers hired at dawn and they agreed to the usually daily wage. At nine o'clock, noon, and three o'clock the landowner again went out into the marketplace and hired and men for the vineyard he saw standing around idle. And finally, one last time, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the landowner goes out and seeks yet more workers for the vineyard. But with those hired at nine, noon, three and five o'clock, no particular wage was mentioned...the landowner only tells these workers he will pay them what is just.

At the end of the day, the Landowner tells his steward to call all the laborers, and starting with the ones hired most recently, and he pays each of the same – the usually daily wage.

The landowner paid to each group hired what was just and right - as agreed. As an outsider looking in, we see the generosity of the landowner. However, when He paid all of the workers the same wage, even though some of them put forth more effort, He angered the ones that had been there since dawn - the full day.

I don't know about you, but I would have been very happy to show up at the vineyard on the eleventh hour and receive full payment, but not accomplish half the work. However, if I really believed that, then I've missed the point of the parable - which is to receive God's generous payment and not envy others who receive the same.

Of significant importance is that the workers who came early in the morning, as well as those who came later in the day, really worked. They did not simply come to the vineyard and stand around. The work was difficult, and the early workers were out in the sun all day, while those other guys only worked in the late afternoon. But the owner of the vineyard also had a point. He had made an agreement with each group as he called them to work in his vineyard. He did not violate his agreement with the first group by being so generous to the last group. But because of the landowner's generosity, the early workers standing in line were expecting a bonus for the hard and lengthy work they contributed. But they received exactly what they agreed upon with the Landowner.

We can't allow ourselves to think that way, especially about the work we're expected to do in the Kingdom. We have a generous Landowner in Jesus Christ. In the parable, Jesus tells us that the wages He has He gives freely to Whom He desires. His payment comes from His grace and if the Landowner desires to give freely, who are we to question His generosity?

The landowner is motivated by his own overwhelming generosity of spirit. And Jesus is telling us that this is how God is and he invites us to change our own attitudes and make them more like those of God. In the Kingdom of God everything is topsy-turvy, everything is the opposite of the way things are in this world.

The labor in the kingdom of God is also not easy. God's Kingdom needs people to plant and God needs people to water and help the vines grow. That labor is difficult and each of us has been given certain gifts from God that is each perfect for a particular job in growing the Kingdom. As a community, we are all called into the vineyard. And Jesus, has an expectation that each of us will work at different jobs while we are in the vineyard.

The landowner pays wages, not only in the amount, but also to whomever He pleases. He has a concern for having His vineyard tended to, but he also goes out again and again inviting other workers into the vineyard...even at the very last hour. That's precisely how God works in our day and age. God never gives up on seeking workers for the Kingdom – and that includes us.

We should see ourselves as family with a common purpose and not just a bunch of individuals, each with their own agenda? We call ourselves brothers and sisters, so we should never treat one another as rivals and competitors. We will always receive a fair wage, and oftentimes much more than we deserve.

These last 4 weeks, we've said goodbye to some of our dearest QAC family members who worked with us in the vineyard...Dot Fay, whose winning smile and concern for others before herself brought us joy. John Weissgarber, whose bright smile could light up the chapel and was the 'older brother' to many of us. Jerry Bourne, whose gentle Southern charm, wit, sense of humor and concern for others kept him young. These have now gone from the vineyard, having received their just wage and now rest with God. The Spirit of Jesus was alive in each of them.

Today is Catechetical Sunday. When you had your children baptized, you heard the words – “you will be the first teachers of your children in the ways of faith. May you be the best of teachers.”

Now your children are growing and we have dedicated men and women working in the vineyard as catechists, continuing that teaching in partnership with you. These men and women do so with no wages, relying on the generosity of the landowner for their spiritual subsistence. Their responding to God's calling is out of love and not because of expected rewards. These men and women will be commissioned today to this task.

We also have with today us a representative of the Saint Vincent DePaul Society who will explain some of the work they do in the vineyard - offering assistance, shelter and hope to those in need. They will be asking for our support. Please consider their appeal carefully as well.

One of the songs we have sung many times in this chapel is 'Anthem.' The words of the refrain are: 'We are called, we are chosen, we are Christ for one another...' That is what Jesus asks of us...to be Christ for one another.

The heart of the gospel is not obligation but invitation. Jesus invites us to know the love of the Creator and he invites to live in the joy of the Holy Spirit. May the Spirit of Jesus always remain alive in each of us so that we may continue our work in the vineyard.

God does graciously bestow on us wages that are far more than we deserve and we should be happy to receive them from such a good and gracious God.

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