

## Connecting to Jesus the Storyteller... "The Workers in the Vineyard"

Hillsboro Presbyterian Church

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Jesus told stories called parables to get through to people like us what it means to live in the present reality of the Kingdom of God. In this parable we learn about God and about God's call to us.

**Matthew 20:1-16:** *For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first." The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. "These men who were hired last worked one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." But he answered one of them, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave to you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

All parables have an "aha"...a moment of understanding of what the parable is about. This "aha" is generally followed by an "uho"...a realization that the parable is about us. These "aha's" and "uho's" change our knowledge of God and the things of God...and the force a change in us...they bring about a paradigm shift...a reorientation to the Kingdom of God. Like the common adage that many people (including myself) live by: "You get out of life what you put into it". How many live by that adage? In this parable, we discover that is not true in the Kingdom of God.

Before we go further, consider the context of the parable: in 19:16-24 Jesus teaches that wealth is not necessarily a sign of God's blessing or an assurance of salvation (the Jews looked at wealth as both); so in 19:25 and in 19:27, the Disciples ask Jesus two questions which set the stage for our parable: "**Who then can be saved?**" and "**What then will there be for us?**". There are also two statements by Jesus that are part of the context: 19:26 "**...with God all things are possible** (so expect to be surprised) - and 19:30 "**Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first**...this reality shift will be repeated at the end of our parable and it prepares us for our parable.

This parable is about the rights of the owner...the Lord of the Land...God and His Kingdom. Notice his all day workers are hired for a "**denarius**", an agreed upon wage...later workers are hired with the understanding that they will be paid "**what is right**". God determines what is right. Notice that God in His "rightness" is generous...exceedingly generous. The Lord of the Land exerts His Lordship in his generosity. The all-day workers end up griping about the Lord's generosity. They seem to totally miss the bonuses they have received: 1) the bonus of having meaningful work all the day long, 2) the bonus of having security in knowing that a denarius was coming at the end of the day, and 3) the bonus of being with the Lord longer. You know, even without the promise of eternal life, I would still want to be a Christian for the living of these days. There is no better life than walking with the Lord...no more fulfilling work than the Lord's work, even when the heat is on or the burden is great. Time and again, when people come to the Lord I hear them say "Oh, how I wish I would have come to know the Lord sooner. Maybe I would not have wasted my youth. Maybe I would not have felt so empty for so long. Maybe I would not have treated my family so bad."

All-day workers who have never known life any other way need to thank God deeply that we have not had to live without His call. You have had the opportunity to be about the Lord's work...you have lived with the assurance of your eternal reward...you have daily lived with the blessing of God's presence and love. I want all long-timers to appreciate the blessings of being long-timers; otherwise we run the risk of becoming gripers. We become resentful of new believers enjoying their newfound love and joy of the Lord. We become resentful of newcomers...people who weren't here in the beginning... people who were not here during the fire...people who haven't taught for years or spent their time on committees ...or financially given here year after year. It may bother you that their vote counts as much as yours at the congregational meeting. It may bother some that they are not called to relieve you of your work here, but rather to join with you in the Lord's work here. Notice: **it is those who have served the Lord longest who misunderstand His ways.**

**The first "aha"/"uho" is the sovereignty and the generosity of God.** It is God who owns the vineyard. It is God who takes on the workers. It is God who pays His workers...according to God's goodness and not according to our human sense of fairness. And it is God who blesses His servants with life today as well as life to come.

**The second "aha"/"uho" is that God brings us on as His servants.** We have been called...to bear "**the burden of the work and the heat of the day.**" Work? We don't talk about work as much as we do about being God's children and being part of God's family and being followers of Jesus. But this parable makes it clear that God also intends for us to work...no matter the burden, no matter the heat, no matter how long our day is long. We never retire from the Lord's work. When we received Christ, we entered God's service. Is it too hard for you to teach Church School? Is it too much of a burden to be in worship every week? Is it too hot to share your faith with a friend or to pray with your family? When have you broken a sweat for the Lord? When have you borne a burden for the Lord? If we want to see some rebirth then we have to go through some labor! Christianity for too many has become too comfortable...a feel-good faith. **All-dayers can forget that we follow one who leads by servanthood.**

Each of us are included in this parable. The all day worker has been Christian all his/her life; they may not even remember a time when they were not Christian. The 9am worker became Christian as a teenager. The Midday worker came to the Lord as an adult. The 3pm worker after he/she had already been set in his/her ways, got tenure, made their bundle, the "been there done that" people, who lived through most of the day - knowing that it all amounted spiritually to "nothing". The 5pm worker I do not think of as a deathbed conversion so much as lost causes...those for whom life seems to have passed them by...the ones who show us it is never too late to respond to God's generous and gracious offer.