

The Workers in the Vineyard

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 20: 1-16

Delivered on September 23, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

I can probably count on one hand all the times I've been fishing in my life. But even if you've been fishing more times than you can count, I would bet your experience in fishing is not all that different from mine. And my experience is this. Whenever I go fishing sometimes the fish bite and sometimes they don't, but even if I don't catch a single thing, the chances are I will still have a pretty good time. I will have a better time if I catch something of course, but my life doesn't depend on whether I catch something or I don't. But what if you are one of the people in the world whose life really did depend on whether you caught something when you went fishing. What if you were one of those people for whom if the fish didn't bite, you didn't eat? Well then I think fishing would not be fun at all. It would be an activity that you instead would associate with anxiety and dread.

Well, the people Jesus tells this story about today are sort of like that. They are like people who don't eat if the fish don't bite. These are day-laborers. These are people who get up while it's still dark not because they have a job to go to but because they have to go look for a job, and a job that lasts one day. And they have to do this every day. They get up, they get dressed, they head out to the marketplace and they wait to get hired. They stand around and wait for some farmer to hire them to do some work, like planting or plowing or harvesting, or something like that. And if they're lucky they get hired for the day and they earn enough so that they can eat and their family can eat. And if they're unlucky they won't get hired at all, and they and their families will go hungry. And if they have a little luck, they'll get hired but only for part of the day. But each morning they wake up early and head out to the marketplace in the hope

of being hired and this is one of their luckier mornings as this morning, they get hired right away. A vineyard owner comes to the marketplace and tells them that if they do some work for him all day like picking grapes, he'll give them a denarius a piece, which is a fair wage for a full day's work. These laborers accept his offer, and their work begins at about 6 am. Well, our story then fast forwards about three hours later to nine o'clock when our vineyard owner goes out to the marketplace again, and sees a few more of these day laborers standing around. And so he hires them, too. At 12 and at 3, he makes two more trips out to the marketplace to do the same thing. And then at 5, for his last trip out to the marketplace for the day, he is surprised to still see guys hanging around even though the day is almost over. "What are you guys still standing around for? It's almost time to go home."

"No one has hired us yet."

"Well, come on and work for me for an hour."

So finally, the work day ends, and all the laborers get in line for their day's pay. And this is where our story gets interesting, because instead of paying the guys who got there at the crack of dawn first and the guys who got there at 5 in the evening last, our vineyard owner has a funny way of doing things. He makes his manager dole out the money to the guys who got there at 5 in the evening first and the guys who got there at the crack of dawn last. A peculiar way of doing things, but you see without this peculiar detail we wouldn't have a story. Because what now happens is that these guys who worked a twelve hour day stand there at the back of the line with their grungy hands and their aching backs and they see the people who showed up just an hour earlier still fresh as a daisy walk away with a full denarius, a full day's pay. And as they see that shiny denarius they say to themselves if these guys who've only been here an

hour got a full day's pay, that must mean what? It must mean we're getting paid for twelve days, for we've been here twelve times as long as they have. Now I'm sure they couldn't have forgotten that the owner of the vineyard only agreed to give them a day's pay as well, but you know, they are thinking about what is fair, not what was promised. And if those who worked only one hour get a full day's pay then surely we who worked twelve hours will get twelve day's pay, because that's what's fair. So these guys get closer and closer to the front of the line, shuffling their weary feet, with visions in their head of what they're going to buy with those twelve days' pay, but when they finally get to the front of the line and look at what's dropped in their weary hands, what do they see? As these day laborers look down, they see not twelve days' pay, not ten days' pay, not even five days' pay, but the same, measly, one day's pay. The same measly single denarius.

Now I wonder what you would think if that happened to you. I know what I'd think, I would think this manager fellow must have made some mistake. I would say, "Now wait a minute, obviously you have me confused with the people who showed up at five pm, but you see I'm not with them. I'm not with them, no sir. You see I'm with the folks who've been here all day. I thought you could tell by my sunburned skin, by my grungy fingers and fingernails that are black with the soil. But that's ok, don't worry about the mistake, I'll go ahead and take my remaining eleven days pay and I'll be on my way. Wait a minute, what's that you say, there's no mistake? You mean you actually meant to pay us the same wage as those who only worked one hour?"

It would seem that someone who wanted to pay a person who worked twelve hours out in the sun the same wage as the person who only worked one hour out in the sun, is someone

who never worked a day outside in their lives. Because if you've ever worked on a farm, or in construction, or in landscaping, or if you've ever simply planted bushes and pulled up weeds in your yard, then you know there's a big difference between working a one hour day in the hot sun and working a twelve hour day. There's no comparison between a one hour day of feeling the sweat just start to trickle down your neck and a twelve hour day of feeling your neck blister and burn, feeling your throat get dry and cracked and feeling as though your fingers are going to fall off, if they dig one more hole in the ground or they pull up one more weed. And so I don't know about you but I'm left asking myself how Jesus could tell a story like this. How Jesus could say that the kingdom of heaven has something to do with a story like this. Well, I can only think that Jesus is trying to tell us that rewards should not be given according to merit. Right? I mean frankly that's what he has to be saying. He's saying forget what you've been taught about giving people what's due to them according to merit or according to dessert. Is that what he's doing?

Like most teachers I should tell you that I operate on the merit system in the classes that I teach. So, you know if you work hard and you earn an A then I give you an A, and if you work a little less hard and you earn a B, then I give you a B, and so forth. And I thought that today I would let you in on a typical email conversation that I usually have with one of my students after I've posted their grades at the end of every semester. Now to protect my students' privacy I won't be reading from any real emails, but then again, I don't have to because the conversation is always the same. Dear Dr. Holmes, my name is John Doe and I was one of your students this past semester. I really enjoyed the class. But I just looked at my grade and I saw where you gave me a C for the class, and Dr. Holmes, I hope you understand that you will need

to change my grade, because I just can't have a C. My parents will be very upset with me if I have a C because they're paying for my college education. Dr. Holmes, I am very sorry to be telling you this, because I know it means extra paper work for you, but I will need to get at least a B in your class.

Dear John, I'm glad you enjoyed the class, and I can certainly understand why your parents will be upset. But unfortunately, I cannot honor your request for a B, since you did not earn a B. You earned a C. Therefore, I will not be giving you a B. Please understand that I do not enjoy giving out disappointing grades to any of my students, but it would not be fair to my students who really did earn a good grade to give out good grades to just anyone who asked for them. Sincerely, Dr. Holmes.

Now whether or not you've ever taught a class, you've all been to school, so you know what's coming next, don't you?

Dear Dr. Holmes, this is John again. I understand that I earned a C in your class. But surely there must be some extra credit that I can do to bring up my grade. Let me remind you, Dr. Holmes that I am not asking for an A, I am only asking for a B.

Just one more. Dear John, I will not be allowing you the opportunity to do any extra credit work because the semester is now over. If you wanted to make a better grade, you could have come to me earlier in the semester for extra help as I said many times. But now that the semester is over, it would not be fair to all the other students to afford you extra time to earn a grade that they only had one semester to earn.

Now I could go on and on, but you get the idea. But if Jesus is telling us to get rid of the merit system then I know a lot of my students who'd be very happy with that. And yet, I doubt

that's what Jesus is doing. I doubt that's what he's doing because I see nothing wrong with thinking that some things should be rewarded based on merit. But I think Jesus gives us this story because it is a mistake to think that everything should be rewarded based on merit. And it is a grave mistake, in fact, to think that God's love for us has anything to do with merit. Here at Northminster, we don't believe you could ever do anything to merit God's love and you know what we take that so seriously here, that when you come to join this church, we don't ask you a whole lot of questions. We don't ask you for instance how many times you've been to church. We don't ask you what your credit is like or how much debt you have. We don't ask you how many times you've been fired or what your grades were like in school, or how messy your house is, or if you've secretly removed the tag from your mattresses when nobody was looking. All we want to know, the only thing we want to know is if you've been baptized and if not if you'd be willing to be baptized, and then we want to know if you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and if so, if you are willing to live the rest of your life as his faithful disciple. That's it. Nothing else is relevant to us. You could have killed somebody. And I mean that, you could have killed somebody, but we don't ask you that. Are you baptized? Do you accept Christ? Will you follow Christ? That's all we want to know.

But what if we did ask people about their past. What would they say? Some people think that because none of us are perfect we'd all be pretty ashamed of ourselves if we had to give a record of all the things we've done before we joined a place like this. But I don't know about that. Now that's certainly true of me. If I had to give an account of all the things I've done in my life and on one side you put all the good things and on the other side you put all the bad things, I'm afraid to find out which list would be longer. But I don't know that all of us would be so

ashamed of ourselves. Because I've also known a few genuine angels in my lifetime. And by angels I don't mean people who are perfect but people who are pretty darn close. People like Mother Teresa or Albert Schweitzer or Oscar Romero. And then, of course, there are people who are on the other side of the spectrum. There are those who have done things that are so unspeakably awful, that there is little that anyone can ever say to them to diminish their sense of guilt. And if you are among those people, you know that others may try to comfort you by telling you that we're all sinners and we've all done things we're ashamed of, but let's be honest, people can say that all they want, but you're afraid that if you were to stand before us and confess what you've done, none of us would ever look at you the same way again. And when we say that everyone is welcome here, you're afraid that we don't mean those who've done what you've done. But what does Jesus tell us? What does he tell us? If you believe this story, then there is no first class and second class and third class seating in the kingdom of heaven. There's no first class seating for the Mother Teresas, third class seating for the Charles Mansons and second class seating for the rest of us. There are only seats at the table with Christ. And you know I guess if you are one of those genuine angels that I talked about, you might not like that very much. You might feel a bit like those guys in the story who've been working since the crack of dawn. But, on the other hand, if you're one of those whose lived your life doing the truly awful, even the unspeakable, then you might find yourself overcome with joy at such good news.

And how often we wonder why it is that those Christian who can't shut up about how much they love Jesus, those Christians who can't stop sharing the gospel for five minutes, are those people who tell you what about themselves? They say things like "I used to be a drug

dealer. I used to be in a gang. I used to be a prostitute. I used to be in prison.” Some people got hired at the crack of dawn. Some at nine in the morning. Some at noon. Some at three. And the last at five in the evening. But the reward for all is the same. By the grace of God, the reward for all is the same.