

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Third Sunday in the Season of Creation

Matthew 20:1-16

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Sept 20, 2026

The Gospel text appointed for this morning from Matthew's Gospel is a parable, and like all parables it's a bit like a jack-in-the-box in the way it gets its listeners all comfortably settled into a storyline they think they know, only to shatter that sense of comfort when all of a sudden, without warning, an unexpected something jumps out, startling them and upending all sense of normalcy and security... kind of like this...

A parable is a story of sorts

That starts without upheaval,

Going on just as you'd expect,

*'till **pop** goes the weasel.*

Our parable for this morning, true to parabolic form, going something like this:

A farmer at the end of the day

Went to settle accounts,

Giving each worker, both early and late,

*The **very same** amount.*

Notice how in the parable Jesus told his disciples, he began his story by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard...”

This is a world with which the disciples would have been very familiar, living in first century Palestine... Vineyards and farmers were part of the landscape, and a story about a farmer who went out looking for laborers, adding more workers as the day went on, would have seemed like “business as usual” to the disciples... As would gathering all the workers at the end of the day to give them their wages...

It was a story to which the disciples could relate, and a landscape in which they felt comfortable... Until of course, the shocking turn of events, when, as the parable goes, all of the workers, no matter how long they had labored under the blazing sun, received the same pay...

Those who had worked longer complaining about the injustice of such a thing of course, only to be scolded by the landowner for their narrow-mindedness and their cold-heartedness in light of the landowner’s amazing generosity... “Whoever could object to such generosity?” he seemed to ask....

But really, what landowner in his right mind would give a day’s wages to a laborer who worked less than an hour? The unsettling and maddening climax of the story being even more troubling with the landowner’s parting words, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

It’s not fair of course, that some laborers worked from sun-up to sun-rise, and some worked for just a few moments, but in the end they all received the same pay. It’s not fair. Nor is it in keeping with good economic policy, the ideals of capitalism or sensible math...

And that's because we're talking about "Gospel math" here... aka "Crazy math"... the kind of math used in the kingdom of God to speak of how utterly free and nonsensical and maddening the grace of God is, even for those who haven't done all the hard work we "church folk" normally consider to be "required"... like going to worship on Sunday mornings, being baptized, getting confirmed, serving on a variety of church committees, and being generous when it's time for the stewardship campaign...

What Jesus wants to say about the grace of God in the parable of the vineyard is that it will not conform to our expectations. It is always a surprise, always a gift, and for religious folk it will oftentimes be maddening because even those who seem least "deserving" according to Sunday School standards are eligible.

Not only "maddening" though, Jesus would have us know, but also both utterly deadly and extravagantly life-giving... And in order for me to say how this is so, I will go by way of a verse from a song I wrote in seminary decades ago and by way of something that happened at Wass's Hot Dog Stand on the corner of Rt. 1 and Rt. 3 in Belfast a few weeks back...

The verse from the song, which I will speak rather than sing (because I have an "old-lady voice" now), I wrote while taking a course on the parables of Jesus, inspired by the very parable appointed for our reading this morning... And it goes like this...

There were some proper people once who had the answers boxed and tied.

They said all kings are born to wealth; that heaven is given to those who try.

They said that those who labor long would get the most on paycheck day,

That at the feast the best of seats are for the folks who pay their way.

Well sorry proper people all, but when I looked in Jesus' Word,

You may be shocked and in dismay to know that this is what I heard...

I heard a king was born in a stable, a downright stinky old place,

That being beloved is nothing you try for, but is only given by grace,

Oh yeah, it's only given by grace.

Believe it or not, at the end of the day all the workers get the same pay,

And when supper is served the first shall be last,

And the last will get the first tray of potatoes, the last will get the first tray.

And the story about what happened at Wass's Hot Dog Stand in Belfast goes like this....

I was coming home from a Maine Council of Churches meeting in Brunswick on the 4th Wednesday in August. It was about 2:00 in the afternoon, and I hadn't eaten lunch, so I was hungry. Having left home before 7:00 that morning, I was tired, and truth be told, rather grumpy after seven weeks of summer visitors.

So I decided to stop at Wass's Hot Dog Stand for something I rarely have, which is a hamburger with everything on it and a Coke. (A treat I thought I deserved after giving practically an entire day over the work of the Maine Council of Churches.)

So just as I was about to turn into the Reny's parking lot where Wass's Hot Dog Stand is situated, a big camper pulled by a big old pickup truck with South Carolina plates pulled in in front of me... (I won't tell you what I sometimes say under my breath about people from away in gigantic motor homes after weeks of their oversized presence in the beautiful little part of Maine that is OURS, thank you very much)...

We both parked our vehicles, and I hurried to get in line before the camper guy and his cute little wife, scurrying up to the window to order my hamburger and Coke from the woman who was taking orders, frying the hamburgers, and cashing people out, all at the same time...

Which I did, handing the woman my credit card as she handed me my hamburger, only to have her say, "Sorry, we only take cash... See, there are two big signs right there that say, "Cash only."

Only I didn't have any cash... And so of course, I got all flustered, because there I was with no way to pay for my lunch, and the Wass's Hot Dog Stand lady was waiting for me to open my wallet and hand her the \$9.65 I owed her, and the camper guy and his wife were right behind me waiting to place their order...

Me finally saying, "Oh dear... How about if you just hang onto my hamburger while I run to an ATM machine, and I'll be back as fast as I can to pay for my lunch?" And she said, "Look, why don't you just take your hamburger and Coke, and next time you're in the area, you can bring me the money?"

And the camper guy behind me said, "No, here, I'd be glad to pay for her lunch"... And so he did... An offer to which I objected at first, but to no avail, as the camper guy insisted...

And so, feeling like a foolish out-to-lunch old lady, I took my lunch, thanking both the woman at the window and the camper guy behind

me for their kindness, and going to the car to eat the hamburger that had come to me totally undeserved... solely by grace... by grace... Me, the one who usually thinks she is the one charged with dispensing grace...

Me, in a huge reversal of roles, suddenly seeing the Wass's Hot Dog Stand lady as the one at the table breaking and blessing the bread, and the camper guy being the one distributing the bread, and me with my empty hands open, receiving it... A Eucharist in a totally different setting than normal, but overflowing with the same kind of grace...

Me, the one who usually sees herself

Through eyes that think me worthy

But grace upending all such thoughts

In devastating beauty...

Which is why I said at the outset of this sermon that God's grace is both utterly deadly and extravagantly life-giving... Utterly deadly to those things inside ourselves that are tempted to restrict God's grace to "the chosen frozen"... Utterly deadly to those things inside ourselves that want to reduce God to a moral gatekeeper and the Christian life to a mathematical equation in which hard work plus piety equals a front row seat in God's kingdom...

All the while there's crazy Gospel math to be practiced, and musical chairs to be played, in which the first and the last are changing places, and the folks at Wass's Hot Dog Stand are teaching the ordained pastor a few things about the nature and presence of God, and the

ordained pastor is suddenly realizing how unsettling and deadly and extravagantly life-giving Easter can be...

Which is why the little song this pastor wrote in seminary while taking a course on parables ends like this...

*I thought I knew what I'd been told about God's shape and size,
But just when things seem clear again, they blur before my eyes.
When last is first, and first is last, and all else is surprise,
I hardly know which end is up or where God may arise,
But in the silent dark of night when tears and doubt wage in my head
I hear the still small voice of God, and this is what that voice it says,*

*It says, "If you're confusion, not sure where you stand,
Well that's just where I want you to be. Cause only in the middle of the
maze of the storm,
can you truly come unto me, oh yeah, can you truly come unto me.
Only when you're spinnin', not sure where you stand,
Will you dare to risk all, call if you fall, will you truly know my grace.
If you're in confusion, not knowin' where you're goin',
Take my hand child, take my hand child, take my hand child,
And you'll be goin' with me.*

And in the end, maybe that's the most startling revelation of our parable for this morning... the shocking revelation that in terms of those who are working on behalf of God's upside-down, topsy-turvy, ridiculously free and unconditional kingdom of love and grace, **we are often the petty, pious penny-pinchers... those who are not quite so sure we want that grace to be quite so free... those who rather like the way the world does math and the way the Church does grace...**

Until we see that we are sorely in need of that grace too... Most sorely in need of that grace too... like I was that August afternoon at Wass's Hot Dog Stand as I received the fullness of God's grace, none of us first or last, but all of us beloved, held in the wide, wild embrace of the God who is love... The love in which *eventually all things merge into one and a river runs through it...*

This is the love that calls to each of us this morning, dear brothers and sisters in Christ... This is the love that calls to us to let go of our small, narrow ways of seeing God and our sensible, "mathematically sound" ways of seeing grace, and to fall into the wild, uncontrollable, prodigal love of God, and there to take God's hand, extended always to each of us, as if to say...

No matter what your life may be like,

No matter how bitter or blue,

The grace of God is yours free of charge,

Love *ever longing for you...*

So come to the kingdom, come as you are,

Early or late, calm or storming,

And you will find love waiting for you

Look, *it's Easter morning...*