



Lectionary 25, Year A

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17th Sunday after Pentecost: Gospel Text - Matthew 20:1-16

Matthew 20:1-16

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹ "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

SERMON TEXT:

Something I've discovered in my time as a pastor, is that you never know when the Holy Spirit is going to hit you upside the head with an idea for a sermon. I always pray that it happens sooner rather than later, but there are times the Spirit likes to stress me out or surprise me. This week, the Spirit talked to me on a drive, or maybe I should say, the Spirit sang to me on a drive. I love music, my whole family loves music, and because we were raised on lots of different type of music, our van radio has a very eclectic mix of stations. We have a station of musicals, stations for the 70s, 80s, and 90s, the Beatles, Soul, Elvis, you name it. So on this infamous drive this week, as I flipped through stations, a theme kept coming up, see if you guess it...First, a song from the musical Hamilton talking about how Alexander would never be satisfied, then a hit from The Rolling Stones called I can't get no satisfaction, then Whitney Houston's didn't we almost have it all, and the Beatles' Long and Winding Road, and finally, Elvis' version of In the Garden, which left me in a little better mood, but still a song of longing. You get it, I kept hearing all these songs of frustration, distance, lost love, and a sense of needing something more, wanting to be satisfied. I hear ya, Spirit, I hear ya.

If you read the first lesson today, you heard from Jonah, and Jonah has always been a book of longing for me. If you've never had a chance to read the whole thing, or watch the VeggieTales movie about it, I recommend giving Jonah a read, it's only 4 chapters. But even if you've never read it, you know the outline. Jonah is a beloved prophet of God, willing to say the hard stuff to the people of Israel, but he does not want to preach it to the rough and tumble city of Ninevah. He bargains, runs, hides, but eventually God gets him there to preach to the people. And, get this, the people actually listen! Jonah should be thrilled; an entire city has come to know God and is changing their ways. But apparently, Jonah is a little bloodthirsty. He'd rather still see the destruction and decimation of a city, rather than experience God's grace given to others. This passage is him whining because people didn't die, and he's hot, and he liked a plant more than he liked a people. He can't get no satisfaction.

And in our parable...Poor Jesus, he has just finished explaining, in chapter 19, that people can't save themselves, but that God will—that nothing is impossible with God, that God will save anyone who wants it, and Peter's response, Peter's never quite satisfied

response, is to not so subtly suggest that he and the other disciples, who had already given up everything to follow, be rewarded a little bit more than everyone else. Ok, Peter, you've earned yourself another parable. And what a parable it is, how much easier it would have been for the landowner to just start with those who have been there the longest-they would have gotten the agreed upon amount, been satisfied, and been on their way before knowing everyone would get the same amount. But the parables are never easy, and as Jesus rightly points out, people are never satisfied. Yes, the first workers labored longer, but they had the satisfaction of knowing they would be paid the whole day, and they got help, and chances are they knew the other laborers and should have been happy that they too would eat. Did the last workers' payment take anything away from the first? No, but it somehow feels like it. They demand their own satisfaction.

On one hand, we may laugh at Jonah's foolishness, be shocked by Peter's demands, and scoff at the first workers, but on the other, we are them, understand them, and far too often, behave like them. In reading a little more about the parable, I found that

one translation of the Greek at the very end, where it reads, "Or are you envious because I am generous?" could read "or is your eye evil because I am good?" It made me think about all the times I've squinted up my eyes when I think something is unfair. Even with the most ridiculous things-like the time a store had a scratch off ticket for either 15%, 20%, or 30% off and the person in front of me got 30% and I only, *only* got 15%. I was still going to buy whatever it was, her 30% took nothing away from me, but I know I gave a squint at her back on our way out. And that is so minor...think of all the ways we begrudge other people happiness, dignity, blessing, or joy. Somehow, we feel slighted if we are not given the same or more, even if we started out in a better place. We think it would be better if it were all the same, but the parable shows a world where all get the same, and not everyone is happy with that either. Where's the satisfaction?

The satisfaction in the parable is never going to be found in the workers. I'm sure those who worked less and were paid the same found joy, but their day was mainly worry and despair with a more upbeat ending. I can only imagine the stress and dissatisfaction of facing the possibility of going home empty handed, of being

not judge worthy by those looking for hired help. They had only an hour of the day to feel productive, and I'm sure they went to get paid expecting very little no matter how hard they may have worked in that one hour. Not one of those workers left the line understanding how or why they were paid the same. No, the satisfaction in this parable belongs to the landowner. Imagine the joy of being able to sustain so many people. He was able to return time and again to the place where people waited to feel useful, to be valued, and bring help to all those who had already labored a long time in the field. He was able to see the stress, the exhaustion, the worry, the ability, and the need of each one of those workers, and give them what they needed. He was generous when he didn't have to be, and patient when he could have been harsh. Like God did for Ninevah, the landowner sought to save all the laborers even if a few didn't like it. Saving Ninevah took nothing away from God's relationship with Jonah, even if Jonah couldn't be satisfied with that.

God's generosity isn't an either/or. When he promised salvation, it wasn't limited. Too often, it is easy for those of us who have been a part of the church our whole lives to see ourselves as the

first chosen. Those who have worked our whole lives in the Lord's vineyard, only to have to make room for those who repent in the last moments. But who does that bring satisfaction to, and is it even true. Many were chosen before us, and some of them are the reason we were raised in the church. We might be the last-it feels a little like the apocalypse these days, but either way, we're left unsatisfied. Unless, we realize that God has already given us everything. How much more do we need that what he has already given? Does the fact that God calls everyone to believe take anything away from us? Is there more than eternal life? Than love, than grace, than forgiveness, than his only Son? I can't think of anything. God's satisfaction comes from his generosity to us, not our work for him. Oh, that's rubs us a bit raw, because we feel we're earning more, doing more, or are worth more for what we do, and that loops us right back to being dissatisfied with the people who don't. But I'll repeat, God's satisfaction comes from his generosity to us, but our satisfaction comes from what we receive being in relationship with God. Everyone who believes is offered eternity, whether they believe since birth or just since death, and nothing is taken away from us in that. Instead, we who labor in the Lord's vineyard through the heat of the day, get the

added benefit of knowing at all times how much we are valued, how much we are loved, how God has chosen us and watches over us. We hear God's voice everyday promising to give us what we need. We don't stand in the unknown wondering if we are loved, needed, chosen. We begin and end the day with our daily needs taken care of. We begin and end our lives knowing God had chosen us. Knowing God has satisfied us. God has satisfied us. Amen.

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