

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

About nine in the morning he went out 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 noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and 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 five in the afternoon 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 who were hired last worked only 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, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Sermon: *God is NOT Fair - He is Generous!*

There is a great episode from that 90's sitcom - Seinfeld - called The Big Salad, and in it, George Costanza believes he's the victim of a very unfair situation.

[Click here to watch it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2zTrBmI1nI>]

You know, I think that scene is so funny because there is so much truth in it! We each have our own sense of what is fair or not fair. And when we're the ones not being treated fairly, it's infuriating!

I think our sense of what is fair or unfair is often determined largely by watching what is happening to others and then comparing ourselves to them. And we compare ourselves to others in so many ways. There are the small things – how we dress, where we shop; the medium-sized things – what kind of cars we drive, the neighborhoods in which we live, the jobs we have or don't have. And then there are the big things – that family is so much more together than ours, that person is a better Christian than I am.

And we're envious!

I remember an eye-opening conversation I had with my brother when we were in our 20's. He told me that he believed that Mom/Dad loved me more while we were growing up; and he had examples of why he thought so. And I told him that I had thought he was the favorite because he could do anything he wanted and they always said no to me. All those years we'd been silently keeping track and comparing - and building up resentments toward each other. So sad!

With our newfound sympathy for each other thinking the other was the "favorite," I found a birthday card for him that year that was just perfect. On the outside it said, "Healthy sibling relationships are built on honesty, right? Good!" And on the inside, it said, "Mom and Dad give me \$1,000 every year on my birthday. How much do you get?"

I know, funny, right? But you know what's NOT funny? The way the grumbling workers feel in our parable this morning! Because, clearly, the landowner was being unfair. It's as if they'd paid for the big salad and were being completely overlooked for all they did for the landowner.

But as with all the parables in the Bible - there's more to it than simply what happens in the story. First of all - let's get this out of the way - it's NOT about the money. And we know this because of what has come before and what will come after. This story is in the midst of a long section on the Kingdom of Heaven and in response to Peter's question of Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And it ends with "The first will be last and the last will be first." So, it's not about the money and fair wages.

Because while the complaining workers get all the attention in the story, the main character really is the landowner – God. And God had every right to decide for Himself, who will receive his blessings.

"Are you envious because I'm generous?" God says. I LOVE that line! And if we're honest - the answer is YES! "It's just not fair!" we cry. But Jesus, as always, throws our sense of fairness out the window.

We are such a rewards-based society that we automatically sympathize with those who worked the hardest. But this isn't a story about getting what you deserve. Rather, it's a story about God's generosity. Because if we start asking ourselves who deserves to be blessed or forgiven, we quickly see that the answer is, "no one."

If we have to work hard - be a good person - to receive God's favor / blessing / eternal life, how will we ever know if we've done or been enough? We can't and we won't!

But it doesn't matter, because Christ is enough. In God's kingdom, all are equally prosperous and poor, equally saint and sinner, equally manager and laborer. We along with everyone else, receive exactly what we need, from a God who is notoriously generous and lavish. Remember it's NOT about the money - or the tangible assets in our lives. It's about God being generous, opening wide the doors to eternal life to EVERYONE. And all they had to do was show up.

Which can be hard to really believe! We say, at least in the abstract, that Christ died for everyone, that God's love is for everyone, that no one is beyond Christ's reach. You may have seen these and other similar affirmations - on photos of sunsets and mountainscapes to be shared with friends on Facebook and Instagram.

But if these claims are true – Christ died for all people; God's love is for everyone; No one is beyond Christ's reach – then they belong on photos of people that you and I would struggle – perhaps even refuse - to be in relationship with. Try filling in the blank with your choice of evil dictator...Christ died for...them, God's love is for...them, they...is not beyond the reach of Christ.

Because as soon as **we've** decided who is in or out of the Kingdom of Heaven - well, then it's not the Kingdom of Heaven any more - it's the Kingdom of Gail or of Jane or of John or whomever is doing the sorting. Put another way, if God hates all the same people you do, then perhaps you've made God into YOUR image, rather than allow yourself to be made in His image.

The Landowner says to the grumbling worker, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Think also about this - the workers don't own the vineyard that they're working in - it's not their land. And the wages they're being paid - that money also belongs to the landowner. Everything here belongs to God. The workers are completely dependent on the landowner. God has provided - a place, an opportunity, and the benefits. All of it is from His generous hand - the workers don't own anything. They are completely dependent on the landowner.

As are we. This parable is not about other people. It's not about those poor folks who have to go find day labor. It's not about people who are too lazy to show up for work on time. This message is not for people who are not here this morning. This message is not for those "less fortunate" than us. It's for you - and me. We too are completely dependent on the landowner - who provides for us, and gives us what we need - generously.

And that's not so easy for us to get our minds around. We believe and we proclaim that we have worked hard for what we have and what we have achieved. We have things - homes, cars, furnishings. And not just tangible things - we have families, friends, talents, passions and affections.

Can we, even for a moment imagine that none of it actually belongs to us? What if all of it were really on loan to us.

You know, to think this way is actually very un-American. We are the land of opportunity, where you can make it if you work hard enough. Where ownership and individualism are high values. Where earning and spending - rather HOW we earn and HOW we spend - define us.

But NONE of these are Christian values. In fact, these American values are NOT Christian values. The Kingdom of Heaven is WAY different from that! And the point of the Christian life is not that we work hard and slog it out in the here and now because the SOME DAY we'll make it into Heaven, or we'll earn God's favor.

NO - the Kingdom of Heaven is NOT where we go after we die, Rather the Kingdom of Heaven has already come to earth, because the King himself - Jesus Christ - has come. We pray it every week - *Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.*

We are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven - here and now. Not somewhere or sometime in the future. Here and now. And as those who live in the Kingdom of Heaven, we are invited into a Kingdom mindset, which is characterized by kingdom thinking.

Kingdom thinking—where there is nothing to be earned. Kingdom thinking—where first and last and in-between are all jumbled together. Kingdom thinking—where none of us can claim anything but gratitude that we are in the mix as recipients of God's generous mercy.

And this kingdom thinking will shape us and change us in very real ways. And we in turn will change and shape the world around us. All because God is generous!

Let us pray,
Generous God, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Amen.