

Matthew 20:1-16
Labor & Kingdom Pay
Memorial Day Weekend Sunday May 29th, 2016

Jesus began this parable with, “**For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.**” In Matthew the author uses almost exclusively the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” and the author of Luke “the kingdom of God.” Both phrases refer to the present and future reality of the Kingdom, each emphasizing either the Kingdom in the present or in the future. This parable emphasizes the future reality of the Kingdom, but that future reality is shown to have present everyday impact on our attitudes and actions.

Now the first time I preached on this parable it was a two hour sermon delivered at a Mingus Mountain Elementary Camp during an Olympic game year. This morning I am going to give you a recap of that sermon so sit back and get comfortable. It was a warm afternoon and the sermon began by playing the Olympic theme song so loud it reverberated off the hills surrounding the camp.

Mingus Mountain Camp has a huge open meadow in the midst of it that is surrounded by cabins and lodges as well as the dining hall and a ring of trees.

This meadow is about the size of 6 or 7 football fields.



The meadow and the camp are actually in the mouth of an extinct volcano. It forms an almost perfect bowl.

In this meadow that day we played a crazy version of the Olympics. We had a “Mini Olympics”. We had 8 teams of children and they played some very competitive games with each other. These were the type of crazy games that you would see on TV shows like “Survivor” or the “Amazing Race”. There were definite winners and losers at each game and scores were kept.

At the end of the Mini Olympics we sat everyone down by the dining hall and announced the scores. We began with the team with a big fat “zero”. They played hard and they played to win, a lot of spirit, but no skill and they didn’t win anything! We announced this team’s score on the sound system and their seeming shame at coming in ‘last’ again reverberated off the surrounding hills.

We asked them to come forward to receive their prize. They were more than a little shocked they’d get anything, but they took their bruised egos (and bodies) forward and got Ice Cream Sundaes with the works!!!



The next lowest scoring team was called forward and they got the same. All the way up to the “winners” with the highest score. They all got Ice Cream Sundaes on a warm sunny summer afternoon.

I then read them this parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard and explained that the Pay in the Kingdom of Heaven is the same for all who enter the Kingdom of God here on earth. All who follow and serve Jesus get heaven as the reward.

It was a 2 hour sermon and for those who simply enjoyed playing the games it was fun from beginning to end. They enjoyed the ride and the reward at the end, though nice, it really didn’t matter that much except it was an ice cream sundae on a warm sunny summer afternoon.

When we read this parable it aggravates our sense of justice and fairness. Shouldn’t those who worked the longest and hardest at the hottest time of the day get paid more? Shouldn’t the winners have gotten banana splits rather than ice cream sundaes like everyone else?

You would think so, and apparently so did the workers who worked all day in the scorching Mid Eastern sun in this parable. But verse 13 points out they got paid what they contracted for and in Jesus’ day that was one denarius. None of the workers were cheated out of anything.

A denarius was enough money to feed a man and his family for a day.



Now the scene that Jesus described was a common everyday scene of desperate day laborers standing in the market place seeking someone to hire them, so that they and their families could eat for 1 day!

They were literally trying to “**earn money today for today’s bread**” as some versions of the Lord’s Prayer say.

None of them were lazy and all were looking for work, which the landowner gladly gave them. The landowner was under pressure too, because if he didn’t harvest his grapes immediately in late August before the September rains came the grapes would be ruined.

Indeed “**the harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few.**” It was a race against time and the elements. So again and again the landowner returned to the marketplace to hire more laborers. The last workers hired worked for only 1 hour.

The way the Jews kept time in those days was: 6am was the beginning of the day and 6pm the end. So the Landowner went out at 6am, 9am, noon, 3pm and 5pm. He literally went out at the 11th hour to hire more laborers.

Now the Landowner, who is God, did 2 curious things. 1st, he paid beginning with the last hired down to the first. There was no seniority here. 2nd, he paid them all the same.

At first this seems totally unfair. In fact, hire some employees today and try to get away with this.



Those who worked all day deserved more, and those who worked only a few hours got more than they deserved.

But the point is in verse 15. “**Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?**” Our God is a generous God and we often treat each other wrongly out of jealousy.

Our God is a gracious God who treats us all equally giving us each what we need in order to enter the Kingdom. Our God is a God who would pay a man for day’s labor, not because he earned it, deserved it, or worked harder and better than everybody else and so was more deserving; but God paid the last equally with the first, because if he didn’t he and his family would go hungry!! In some ways this goes back to “**Seek first the Kingdom of God and all other things will be added to you.**”

This parable leaves us uncomfortable and jars our sense of fairness and points out the dangers of envy and jealousy.

Now as I thought of God awarding us all equally, I realize very clearly that some put in a lot more work for the Kingdom of God than others and at a lot greater personal expense. In the Church, indeed, are those who have given far more than others.

A story from a book called “Nevertheless” by Mark Rutland summarizes what Jesus was getting at and that sometimes it just doesn’t seem fair.

Mark Rutland wrote this about a missionary he once met in Africa. He wrote, “*Blind and frail, her wiry, white hair stirred ever so slightly by a faint, hot breeze, the old German missionary came slowly toward me. She could not have possibly known I was standing there with two*

Africans watching her tap her way slowly across the baked, grassless "lawn" of the guesthouse.

"Who is she?" I asked the Africans.

"Bible translator," They replied, "Now she has river blindness."

"She will die?"

"Yes, she will die. She is going back to Germany. She will die there."

"What did she do here?" I asked.

"She put the Bible into two languages."

"All by herself?"

"All by herself!"

"Now she goes home to die in Germany?"

"All by herself."

The unfairness, the lonely blind, painful unfairness of it swamped me. I stood there slowly sinking into a bottomless marsh of injustice. She should have been on a dais at a head table, receiving honors and applause and the undying gratitude of thousands.

Instead she would get a sightless Lufthansa flight and a few months unvisited in a ward where impoverished old ladies die.

It seemed the wrong ending for a holy life full of great kingdom accomplishments."

This weekend, this Memorial Day weekend we remember the sacrifice, the work others did for us to make sure we are free. Many fought and some died. Many still carry the scars of battle. They carry on having lost limbs. Some carry invisible scars, emotional scars like PTSD that makes life very difficult if not impossible at times. All who served gave some and some gave all. It seems random and unfair.

And some sacrifice a lot more for the Kingdom of God than others, but I remember one of my favorite scriptures 1 Corinthians 12:7, **"To each has been given a gift of the Spirit for the good of all."**

Some are called to do more and suffer more than others. Some in fact are given the spiritual gift of “suffering” for the Lord and even martyrdom. But all, all of us, are given work to do. We are “**created in Christ Jesus to do good works that God prepared in advance for us to do.**”

We have been created in the image of our God to work and labor from the beginning in the Garden of Eden to the end of time, and even beyond the end of time in the New Heaven and New Earth. We will be given work to do in the kingdom of heaven.

We are made to labor, given gifts to labor and given a vocation. Each and every one of us has work of the Kingdom to do here on earth until that time that God calls us home. In my work with an Evangelical Community called 3dm and in a retirement seminar I once went to, they made the point that clergy and Christians never really retire. Our calling and place of service just keeps changing. Rev. Jon Leonard, our pastor emeritus, has retired at least 4 times that I know.

We can either enjoy the work, the game we are in as we strive for the same prize of heaven, or be miserable in the process by jealously looking at others and the amount of work they are, or are not doing. I believe this parable calls us to enjoy the work we are involved in both for a present and for the Kingdom of Heaven. It calls us to find meaning in our work.

The Bible puts it this way, **Colossians 3:17 “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** In this we find meaning and purpose and fulfillment in this life and in the Kingdom to come.

We are made to work and we are made to rest. We work out of our rest and it is during our times of rest and abiding with God that we find the strength and direction for our work. I will speak more on rest and work in the next several weeks.

God created the world and human beings, and the first thing God did after creating humans was command them to rest. It was after they

were rested that they began to take care of the Garden; the work they were created to do.

This is helpful to us today because as you look at our parable you see that all were fulfilling their God giving calling to work. But the ones who worked the longest were tired, and when they saw the others who only worked a short time getting paid the same they were jealous.

God called some late in the day and God calls some late in life. And as life goes on God often calls us to new work. Let us rejoice that God has called us and enjoy the work God has called us to do.

The warning here is to pay attention to our own work, our own gifts and talents and not that of others. Make sure we are not being lazy or slothful. Particularly do not compare our work with others, just enjoy the game, the journey that God has put you on.

If we do our work, with our eye to God, giving it our God given best, then God will honor the rest.

Those that may be lazy, slothful or avoiding their God given calling? God will take care of them. Not the way we sometimes wish God would take care of them. But in the way that shows God's heart and care as we've seen in this parable.

Indeed, you have a God given calling and gifts. God has given you gifts of the Spirit. God has given you all you need to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth and here after. Just make the commitment that **whatever you do, in word or deed, that you do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus!**

In Jesus' Name Amen!!!