

“The Vineyard Workers”

Matthew 20: 1-16

September 5, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Labor Day Weekend. Labor Day weekend has always been bitter sweet for me. When I was a child, Labor Day signaled the end of the summer break from school; I loved the hot lazy days of summer when we could sleep late and were free to play outdoors until 9:00 at night. Later, after I became a mother, I looked forward to the start of school and the return of a structured routine and cooler weather.

Labor Day is an annual celebration of the social and economic achievements of American workers. Curious, I looked up the history of Labor Day. There is a little controversy about who first came up with the idea. One story is that one of the officers of the Central Labor Union in Canada introduced the holiday 1882. Apparently, we borrowed the idea of a labor festival from Toronto, Canada. The first Labor Day holiday recorded in the United States occurred in New York City on September 5, 1882. President Grover Cleveland made it a national holiday in 1894 reportedly, to settle a labor strike. The form for the celebration was outlined in the first proposal of the holiday: A street parade to exhibit to the public “the strength of and spirit of our trade and labor organizations, followed by a festival for workers and their families.” Today it is a day to play; to rest from

our work. Like the Sabbath, Labor Day reminds us that we are more than just what we can produce. If you drive through Greenville, you will probably smell the barbeque grills as they are fired up to cook ribs or hamburgers. Labor Day signals the end of wearing white shoes and the beginning of college football.

I thought an appropriate scripture reading for this morning, in celebration of Labor Day, was the parable of the Vineyard Workers.

It is important for us to understand the context within which Jesus shares this parable. In the paragraph just before this parable, we learn that Peter has just asked Jesus what he and the other disciples can expect as a reward for their loyalty to Jesus. They have given up everything to follow him, Peter points out. What will Jesus give them in return? They want some return on their investment. Jesus responds by saying “the last will be first and the first will be last.” Then he tells the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

That is what happens before the story. What happens after the story is that the mother of James and John approaches Jesus and asks him, nicely, to give to her two sons the best seats of power in the kingdom of God; one son to be seated on his left and one on his right. Politely but firmly, Jesus lets her know that she doesn't know what she is talking about, because his throne will not be made out of gold and jewels but out of wood and nails, in the shape of a cross. It's not about privilege but servanthood.

It helps to know the context within which Jesus shares this parable; to understand that both before and after Jesus tells it, his own disciples are jockeying for position at the head of the line, competing for the best seats in God's kingdom. We know a little something about individualism and seeking what is in our own best interests instead of supporting the common good and extending support to our neighbors.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Matthew 20: 1-16

Will Willimon, chaplain of Duke University Chapel for many years and author (*Resident Aliens*), tells the story of a Northerner who was traveling through the South. On one particular morning, the traveler stopped for breakfast in a small rural community, at the local cafe. He ordered coffee, eggs, sausage, toast and juice. When his plate arrived, he noticed a pile of whitish-gray lumpy stuff in the corner of his plate. Confused, he called the waitress over to his table, and inquired what the "stuff" was.

"Why, sir", she responded, "those are grits."

"But I didn't order them," he informed her.

With a big smile, the waitress reassured him, "Sugar, you don't order grits. They just come. Isn't that great?"

The good news of the gospel, as we will hear this morning, is that we do not order God's lavish, radical and unconditional provision and grace. It just comes.

The parable we just read this morning is about grace. And God's grace just comes. We don't order it up, we don't earn it, we don't control who gets it and who doesn't get it, and a lot of times we don't deserve it or understand it.

Grace.

Do you remember the last time you stood in line to get in to some special event? Its been a while since I've stood in line for anything, much less been around that many people at one time! But I can remember standing in line with my children to ride a roller coaster at Disneyworld. We stood in line for more than an hour in the hot summer sun, waiting anxiously to get to the front of the line where a young man or woman in a goofy costume would unhook the ropes keeping us in line and we would finally reach the front of the line to be escorted to the roller coaster car. What would I have done if someone was suddenly allowed to cut in line in front of me? Or imagine the last time you sat in traffic only to have someone fly past you in the emergency lane to cut in front of you.

According to today's story, the owner of the vineyard just feels like starting at the back of the line to pay his workers, being generous. Grace. It just comes. The vineyard owner can do whatever he wants to do in his own vineyard, and what he wants is to let the last be first and the first be last. Everyone will be paid; no one will go home empty handed.

He simply wants to reverse the order and pay all the workers the same thing, regardless of how long they have stood in the sun.

Some of the workers had been there since dawn and some of them were hired as late as one hour before quitting time. He promises them all a fair wage. Then comes the moment they have all been waiting for. The blazing sun goes down and the householder calls his steward to give them all their pay.

Beginning with the last to be hired, he presses coins into each of their hands. When they gasp out loud, the others strain to see and a murmur goes through the crowd. The householder has turned out to be a very generous man! If he is giving the latecomers a whole denarius for just one hour's work, then apparently those who arrived at dawn are about to be rich beyond what they ever imagined.

But before they can do the arithmetic in their heads, the steward has paid them all – one denarius. Whether they came at dawn and slaved all day or showed up at five to work the last hour, their pay is the same, and the murmurs at the front of the line quickly turn to grumbling. “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us,” say the first to be hired, their faces sunburned and their clothes sweaty.

That is when the householder reminds them that he has kept his part of the bargain; that he has paid them exactly what they agreed to be paid, and what business is it of theirs what he pays the others? The vineyard is his; the money is his. Isn't he allowed to do what he wants to with what belongs to him? “Or do you”, he says, “be-grudge my generosity?”

You bet they do. You bet we do! Equal pay for equal work is fair. Treating everyone the same when they are not the same is not fair.

Life is often not fair. You have heard the stories: a man cares for his elderly mother, taking her to doctor appointments, keeping track of her finances and paying her bills out of his own salary. His siblings call from time to time but do not help this son in the daily care of their mother. The mother dies and the man sits and listens as his mother's will is read: "I leave my estate to be divided equally among my four dear children, because I love them all the same."

Life is not fair, which is why it seems all that much more important that God should be. God should be the one who polices the line, making sure everyone stays in their places. No breaking in line. It should be assured that the first remain first and the last stay at the back of the line.

The most curious thing about this parable to me is where we locate ourselves in line. The story sounds quite different from the end of the line than it does from the front of the line. Isn't it interesting that 99% of us hear it from the perspective of being at the front of the line? We are the ones who have gotten the short end of the stick; we are the ones who are being cheated out of something. We are the ones who deserve and have worked so hard for those seats next to Jesus. We don't even want to consider who the folks are at the back of the line – who they are, what they need, what their lives are like?

“You can be first in line, after me.” When have we become so self absorbed with our own privilege and self interests that we don’t even know who it is that is behind us in line? If Jesus told us that he came to serve those who live at the back of the line, those who live on the fringes, those who struggle to simply survive each and every day – well, why shouldn’t we, who have so much, insist that they move to the front of the line.

Grace. And if God is gracious towards us, ought we not be gracious to those around us?

The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. Jesus is calling us out into the world, inviting us to shift our paradigms from selfishness to selflessness; from attitudes of entitlement to servanthood. God seems to love us indiscriminately, and seems to enjoy reversing the systems we set up to explain how God relates to the world. By starting at the end of our lines, with the last and the least, God lets us know that his ways are not our ways. God loves us not because of who we are and what we deserve but because of who God is. Grace. It just comes.