

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2026
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Frazier
Matthew 20:1-16

Most of us have a strong sense of fairness. From childhood, we learn that if one person works longer, they should receive more. If one person contributes more, they should be rewarded accordingly.

That is why Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard can make us uncomfortable. The landowner hires workers at dawn, then at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and even at 5 p.m. At the end of the day, every worker receives the same wage.

To us, this sounds unfair.

But... Jesus is not teaching us about economics. He is teaching us about the kingdom of God. He is showing us that God's economy operates differently from ours. With this parable, I think it may be important to consider the heart of the landowner. He is not doing labor relations the normal way. He doesn't seem to be primarily focused on calculating productivity. Instead, he responds to human need.

The first thing we notice is that the landowner keeps going out. He goes out early in the morning. He goes out at the third hour. At the sixth hour. At the

ninth hour. And even at the eleventh hour. The workers are not searching for him nearly as much as he is searching for them.

This is a picture of God. Throughout Scripture, God is the One who seeks. He sought Adam in the garden. He called Abraham. He pursued Israel. He came looking for Zacchaeus. Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost."

The generosity of God begins long before payday. It begins with God going out into the marketplace looking for people who need Him. Some came early. Others came late. But all were sought by the landowner. That is grace.

The most moving moment in the parable comes near the end of the day. The landowner finds men still standing in the marketplace. He asks, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?" Which is a bit confusing, because he has presumably been to the marketplace several times that day. Maybe he goes to marketplaces in several villages.

But anyway, notice what he does not say. He does not criticize them. He does not accuse them of laziness. He does not lecture them about poor decisions. No, he asks a question.

And their answer is heartbreaking: "Because no one has hired us." In other words, they have been passed over all day. Others were chosen. Others were

wanted. Others were given opportunities. But these workers were left behind. Yet the landowner sees them.

At the heart of Jesus's teaching is our God who notices people others overlook. Our God sees the widow. God sees the orphan. Sees the forgotten and the lonely. Our God sees the struggling family. God sees the person no one else chooses.

The workers standing there at five o'clock may have felt invisible, but they were not invisible to the landowner. And many people today feel the same way. The good news of the gospel is that God sees them.

Here is where the parable becomes especially powerful. The landowner hires the last workers with only one hour left in the day. From a business perspective, it makes no sense. Why bother? Why hire someone for only one hour?

Yet he does. And then he pays them a full day's wage. Why? Because the issue is not how much work they produced. The issue is what they needed. In the first-century world, a day's wage was often no more than what a family needed to survive that day. No paycheck meant hungry children. No work meant no bread on the table.

The landowner understood something important: A man who worked one hour still had a family to feed. A man hired late still had needs. A man

overlooked all day still had children waiting at home. The wage tells us that the landowner was thinking not only about labor but about lives.

This is God's economy. God sees needs we do not see. When God gives grace, He is responding to human need, not rewarding human achievement. Every one of us stands before God as needy people. Some came to faith early in life. Some came to faith late in life. Some have served Christ for decades. Others have only recently begun following Him. Yet all of us depend on the same grace. All of us need the same Savior. All of us receive the same eternal life.

The workers who labored all day become upset. Their focus shifts from the generosity they received to the generosity someone else received. This may be our problem as well. They are not angry because they were underpaid. They received exactly what was promised. They are angry because someone else was blessed. Comparison has a way of turning gratitude into resentment.

The moment we begin comparing ourselves to others, we lose sight of God's goodness to us. Peter may have been in Jesus' mind when He told this story. Just before this passage, Peter asked, "What then will there be for us?" The question is understandable, but Jesus wants His disciples to know that the kingdom is not built on comparison and competition.

The kingdom is built on grace.

If everything we have is a gift from God, there is no room for jealousy. Instead, there is room for gratitude.

The landowner asks: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" The parable ends with a celebration of generosity. The workers expected fairness. The landowner gave grace. Fairness would have paid the last workers only for one hour. Grace paid them enough to live. Fairness gives people what they deserve. Grace gives people what they need.

That is the story of the gospel. If God dealt only in fairness, we would all stand condemned. Instead, He deals in mercy. Instead, He deals in grace. Instead, He gives salvation through Jesus Christ. The cross is the greatest example of God's economy. Jesus bore our sin and gave us His righteousness.

We received what we did not earn because He gave what we did not deserve. The economy of the landowner is the economy of God. God seeks those who are lost. God notices those who are overlooked. God understands the needs of those whom others ignore. God gives grace not according to human calculations but according to divine generosity.

The workers hired at the eleventh hour remind us that no one is forgotten by God. No life is beyond His notice. No person is too late. No need is hidden from His eyes. The same Lord who saw those workers standing in the marketplace sees every person standing in need today. And His invitation

remains: "Go into my vineyard." Because in God's kingdom, the greatest truth is not how long we have worked, but how gracious the Master is.