

THE GREAT REVERSAL
MATTHEW 20:1-16
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A good friend, who spent the holidays in California wine country, told me how he noticed, on several occasions, migrant workers hanging out each day, leaning against the wall of a building where vineyard managers came to hire them.

Not all of them were employed each day. But the ones who were did not hesitate to jump in the pick-up truck for a day of employment.

Unless you've been out of work you may not appreciate the visceral feeling of joy when a job comes along. We are painfully aware of this in a week, here at Westminster, when we have had to eliminate one position and reduce the hours of three.

So life giving is work – to our sense of purpose and self esteem – that the difference between having a job and being unemployed is the metaphor Jesus chooses in the parable today for the difference between a life lived in God's grace and a life lived without God.

In the story, the vineyard is the Kingdom of God; the owner of the vineyard, God himself; the workers – everyday folks like you and me. The alternative to laboring in the vineyard is a meaningless existence.

I can imagine those first workers responded with joy when the owner of the vineyard said, "come with me and I will pay you the usual wage for a day's work."

Like Jesus' other parables this story too takes an unexpected turn. As the day draws to a close and the vineyard owner pays his workers, the wage given to everyone is the same. Whether they spent long hours in the hot sun or were sent to work one hour before quitting time, each worker received the same wage.

Here, the story morphs from what sounds like a simple lesson about work into a confusing and disturbing account of our relationship with God.

On this day we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper I'd like to sort through some of the parable's confusion and surprise and discern what the story might be saying to us individually and as a congregation.

If you have ever felt like those workers who bore the burden of the day and received the same payment as the ones who hardly worked at all, you have some good biblical company: namely, the faithful older brother of the Prodigal Son. Remember how the kid brother shows up after blowing his inheritance in Vegas, the old man welcomes the little brat home, and the elder brother witnessing the drama asks "what am I chopped liver?"

Most of us have some of that older brother or all day worker in us when it comes to situations where someone we think really doesn't deserve it receives rewards and blessings. Family inheritances are notorious for generating such sentiments.

Early in my career a good friend leapfrogged from one glorious assignment and opportunity to the next. I worked harder on any given day than this charismatic classmate and secretly resented his good fortune.

My hunch is Jesus told this parable because feeling like we've been looked over or cheated and should be more blessed is a pretty common feeling.

Siblings are especially prone to the "she got...he got...it's not fair" syndrome. Bill Cosby says dealing with such bickering defines parenthood. Parents of only children get off too easily. He thinks there should be two classes of parents.

No doubt God, the parent, deals with his disgruntled children all the time.

Maybe you see where I am going with this. Setting aside our joy for the many blessings of God to register our complaints with the Creator for unequal treatment is not the most profound theological issue of all time—but it may be one of the most significant and vexing spiritual hurdles we have to face in daily life.

The problem with complaining to God for unequal treatment is it dismantles our ability to be God's laborers, God's servants to the poor and oppressed.

A member of our mission committee talks about God's blessings in his life. The way he sees it, what we give back through time, talent and treasure is proportionate to our awareness of and gratitude for God's blessings. If the chance to give or serve or reach out in some way is lost or limited because we are blinded to our own blessings by someone else's good fortune or even by our own ill-fortune then this parable is for us.

Let me shift from disgruntled disciple to that image of the joyful giver and propose a guideline for giving based on our mission committee member's observation: if what we give or how we reach out is measured by anything other than our response to God's grace in our lives—our giving will be motivated or driven by something less than today's parable says it should be.

It is a powerful message: we are called to focus on our own discipleship; not to compare ourselves with our neighbor; to be thankful for what we have. God cares for you and me more than the lilies of the field and birds of the air, how much more, therefore, will he tend to your life and needs.

As if modeling Jesus' very admonition St. Paul writing from prison, says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be made known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

After a week when we balanced the budget of this congregation for the first time in its history on the giving of its members I've had a chance to do some reflection.

We have made significant progress over the past five or six years: doubling the annual pledged revenue for ministry. But we have a significant way to go.

If we aim to be the congregation our mission goals and programs of ministry point to, we're just not there yet. A balanced budget demonstrates fiscal responsibility. It doesn't convey passion for ministry or gratitude for God's blessings.

We said two years ago the cost of opening the doors of this church not just each Sunday but each day is \$1,000 per member, per year. I have not heard anyone say we don't have the capacity to give at that level. What we don't have yet is the will to give at that level.

But an important process has started. We are shifting the focus from ourselves to God, from ourselves to our West Side neighbors, from ourselves to a world of need.

Jesus framed it as a reversal of perspective. A great reversal from our agenda to God's.

When you think about it, the bread and wine are God's investment in you and me. Not that we deserve it. God gave it so that we might realize his giving has no limits and includes all people.

Once that message seeps into a human heart or the heart of a congregation there is nothing that can hold a person or a church family back from giving away their life in return. Amen.