

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
September 18, 2011
Matthew 20.1-16
"It Ain't Fair"
Pastor John Guthrie

A farmer and his wife were sitting in their modest kitchen one night. The wife reminded the farmer that it was only a week until their 50th wedding anniversary. They began to talk about ways they could celebrate the special day. Finally the wife exclaimed, "I know, Homer! Let's have a party! We can invite our friends, buy a cake from the baker, and have a big barbeque. You can even slaughter that cow you've been saving for a special occasion." The farmer thought for a moment, and replied, "I don't know, Ethel. Why should the cow suffer for something that happened fifty years ago?"

Today we read another one of those many parables about farming that are scattered throughout the gospels. This one involves a farmer who raises grapes, the owner of a vineyard.

Let's set the context for this somewhat disturbing parable. Jesus has just encountered a rich young man who comes to him while he is teaching. The young man asks Jesus, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" That question is wrong on so many levels, but such is not our focus for today. Jesus replies by telling the young man that he must keep the commandments and mentions a few of them: "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not bear false witness."

The young man replies that he has kept all of these, but he knows something is still missing. Of course, since no one has ever perfectly kept all the commandments of the Torah, neither had this young man. Anyway, knowing that something is still not right he asks Jesus what else he must do. Jesus tells him finally, "Here's what you have to do. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." The young man leaves grieving, we are told, because he had many possessions. Another example of Jesus' concern that wealth and possessions can and do stand in the way of the richest life possible, which is the life that only he can give.

Jesus then tells his disciples that it is extremely difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Peter reacts with disbelief and consternation, saying, "Look, Lord, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we receive in return for all the things we have given up?" That question is also wrong on several levels, but Jesus promises Peter that he and the other disciples will sit on thrones in heaven and judge the whole world, and that those who have left their homes and families for him will receive a hundredfold what they have given up, and eternal life as well. And then Jesus makes this strange statement: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Then there is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard which we heard a moment ago. So the parable is set in the context of Jesus teaching his disciples about wealth and position and power and the dangers posed by those things. Even if you have heard or read this parable dozens of times before, it probably continues to unsettle you at least a little. I know it does that for me.

What the parable is really about is the kingdom of heaven. This is another of those many kingdom parables in Matthew's gospel. Perhaps you remember some of the ones we explored a few weeks ago in chapter 13. The kingdom of heaven is like a person who sows seeds on different kinds of

soil. The kingdom of heaven is like a person who sows good seeds, but weeds come up with the wheat. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast mixed in with flour. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure of immense value buried in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great value. The kingdom of heaven is like a net that catches both good fish and bad fish. See Matthew chapter 13.

Matthew uses the term “kingdom of heaven” thirty-two times in his gospel, and the equivalent term “kingdom of God” four times. This strange and unusual concept is central to Matthew’s depiction of Jesus and what Jesus has come to do.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is another kingdom parable. The real world doesn’t work like this. The workers who started at first light are paid the same as the ones who go to work at the very end of the day. The ones who started early are justifiably upset. When it comes time to pay the laborers, the owner of the vineyard pays the last-hired workers a denarius. In the same way the laborers who started at 3:00 and noon, and 9:00 all receive a denarius. And finally, when it comes to the ones who have labored all day in the heat, they also receive a single denarius.

Our innate sense of justice is assaulted. “Unfair!” we want to cry. And it certainly is, by the standards of human kingdoms. But this is a kingdom of heaven parable, and even though that kingdom is present now on earth, and was present then on earth, the kingdom doesn’t work like earthly institutions.

The landowner reminds the first-hired laborers that he is paying them exactly what he agreed to pay them at the beginning of the day. “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” he asks the angry laborers. “Are you envious because I am generous?” Then Jesus says to his disciples, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” That is almost identical to what he said before he began telling the parable.

Jesus starts and finishes with almost the same statement. This kingdom parable is about who will be last, and who will be first. And, very apparently, being first is not determined by time or effort in the enterprise. In fact, it seems that we are to stop worrying altogether about who is first and who is last.

Most interpreters believe the owner of the vineyard represents the living God, and you and I are the laborers. The owner of the vineyard doesn’t really care how long we have labored in the vineyard, that is in the kingdom of heaven. Surely the owner wants for us to work diligently and with purpose. There are many other passages of scripture which make that clear. But ultimately the grace, providence, and love we receive from the owner of the vineyard, that is, the God of heaven and earth, is not dependent on our productivity or industriousness or creativity.

This parable is really difficult for those, like me, who have been convinced by a lifetime of experience that diligence, effort, industriousness, determination, and conscientiousness are cardinal virtues. In fact, many of us believe, these virtues are necessary in order to compensate for deficiencies in skill or intelligence. If you just work hard enough, we believe, you can overcome almost any inadequacy. In my younger years I was recognized on more than one occasion for my diligent work ethic, both in athletics and academics. But I can guarantee you I was fundamentally working to compensate for deficiencies.

This parable teaches, I think, that a superior work ethic is not a bad thing, but it is ultimately not what really matters. In the kingdom of heaven it really doesn’t matter who is the most gifted or who puts out the most time or effort, or even who achieves the greatest results. What really counts is the grace we receive, freely and without price. The same kind of grace that the vineyard owner shows to the laborers who go to work at the end of the day.

It would be shortsighted and wrong for us to interpret the parable to mean that we can simply coast along, putting out little or no effort. It's all about motivation, isn't it? We cannot earn our way into the good graces of the vineyard owner, but we can respond to the overwhelming generosity of the owner by giving our lives in his service. We cannot in any way repay the owner for his astounding kindness, but we can and indeed must respond by giving our lives as living sacrifices.

That's how this whole grace and works mystery is meant to work. We cannot earn God's love, but we surely can respond to it. We cannot earn eternal life for ourselves, but we certainly can live in grateful response to the free gift of redemption. We cannot make ourselves good enough to receive God's salvation, but we most certainly can respond in service to God and to others. These kinds of ideas are at the center of this parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

Furthermore, there's this concept of the last being first and the first being last. That's a kingdom characteristic. It may happen sometimes here on the earth, whenever the underdog comes out on top, but in the kingdom of heaven that's the way it always is. In fact, there no longer is a first and there no longer is a last. There is only the grace of God.

Isn't it stunning to think of a life in which we are no longer judged by our performance or success or productivity, but rather a life in which all that matters is grateful response, to the best of our ability and using the gifts we have been given? To know that we no longer need to prove ourselves to anyone, and most especially to the owner of the vineyard, who showers grace and favor on everyone, regardless of time or effort or anything else. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Remember that the kingdom of heaven is not heaven. Remember that you and I live in an incomplete and unfinished kingdom of heaven right now, today. The kingdom became present when Christ came to live with us, but it remains incomplete and imperfect. When he returns again then it will be completed and perfected. But we are called, in response to the grace we have received, to exhibit the kingdom to the world by serving and loving in the name of Christ.

That means that this life of response, not self-justification, is ours this very day. That means that we can live right now in grateful and joyous thanksgiving, not dreary and anxious concern over whether we have been or are being good enough, working hard enough, being productive enough, meeting expectations or not, and so on. The kingdom is not like that. And we are living in the kingdom right now, today.

So we need especially to stop comparing ourselves with others, and simply live in grateful response. We need not to worry about earning our way into salvation, and instead live in the assurance that we have already received it through the death and resurrection of the owner's son. It's not about earning anything. It's about responding in joyful thanksgiving.

The first will be last, and the last will be first. We have received a free gift of redemption and eternal life through Christ Jesus. So have many others, including many others we might think unworthy. But it doesn't really matter what we think. It matters only what the owner of the vineyard thinks.

There's no grumbling allowed in the vineyard.