

Message for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (9/20/2020)
Matthew 20:1-16

If the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard bothers you, you're in good company. Author and professor Brené Brown tells the story of visiting her Episcopal church for the first time and hearing the priest preach and teach about this parable. "What do y'all think?" he asked the congregation. "[I think it's] a terrible parable," she thought to herself. "I like stuff you can earn, and I like [for] those people who are not working as hard as [I am] to pay." She was irritated enough that she had to come back the next Sunday to hear what the follow-up would be.

And, as providence would have it, she stayed. "If you're looking for a church," Brown muses, "I think if your heart's open, it finds you, you don't find it." And lo and behold, when she eventually agreed to teach Vacation Bible School, which parable did she feature? The Vineyard Parable. "I brought Monopoly money," she recalls, "and paid kids for jumping jacks." Some students were challenged to do jumping jacks for five minutes, watching breathlessly as a second crop of kids started their jumping jacks halfway through and the last group began with only seconds remaining and had to do only two. Brown walked down the line handing out 500-dollar bills to everyone, and as she remembers, "These kids went crazy. They were, like, 'Uh-uh, that is not fair!' And I'm, like, 'I know!' ...They say God is like this; God doesn't care how long you're doing jumping jacks... love is going to happen to you either way." She

admits that she still doesn't like it: "I get it," she says, "I just keep going back to church hoping the parable is going to change."¹

If this story rubs us the wrong way, it's because it upends the logic of fairness, which is fundamental to the way we tend to see the world. Aren't the first laborers justified in their frustration? They worked longer, so they should receive more. But, read closely: they don't object to their wage per se; after all, they receive the amount to which they agreed at the beginning of the day. No, the first workers object to being placed on level ground with the others²: "These last worked only one hour, and *you have made them equal to us* who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." In other words, the vineyard owner's method of payment has collapsed any hierarchy that might be established by rights. *How can we calculate the value of our work*, the first laborers grumble, *unless you compensate us accordingly?* **It's a matter of comparison, of relative worthiness.** But the vineyard owner doesn't abide by the workers' assumptions: "Are you envious because I am generous?" he asks rhetorically. I prefer a more wooden translation of that phrase: "Is your eye evil because I am good?"³

Jesus' parable makes it painfully clear that **God's ways are not our ways, no matter how stubbornly we project human expectations onto God.** One interpreter sums up the dilemma this way: "If we try to use worldly causation

¹ www.theworkofthepeople.com/grace-is-not-attractive.

² See M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 394.

³ See Lewis R. Donelson, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 95.

to reason and draw conclusions about who God is and how God works, we are doomed to fail.”⁴ **God’s goodness isn’t fair; God isn’t interested in keeping track of our merits and rewarding us accordingly.** And for many of us, that’s a bitter pill to swallow. Maybe it’s easier to keep hoping that the parable will change than it is to change our outlook.

But, what if we put ourselves instead in the place of the latecomers? Imagine what they think of the vineyard owner’s unorthodox business practices. Bear in mind that all day laborers rely on intermittent work for their survival. They get work, or they go hungry. The fact that the last workers are “idle” at five o’clock in the afternoon doesn’t mean they’re lazy; they simply haven’t been hired that day. What’s more, they go to work for an hour with no promise of payment at all. Nevertheless, they, too, receive a denarius, the value of their daily bread. And, this is surprising grace – they get what they need in spite of their relatively lower output.

As it turns out, **the vineyard owner’s method of payment is a terrible way to account for productivity. It is, however, an excellent way to ensure that everyone gets enough to eat.** And, when we examine the biblical record, we discover that this story is consistent with divine economics all along: God showers the people with manna and quail in the wilderness – enough for everyone, but impossible to hoard; Jesus multiplies bread and fish for the multitudes on the basis of need, not deserving; those who have much do not

⁴ Rolf Jacobson, “The New Math of the Kingdom of God,” www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5455.

have too much, and those with little do not have too little.⁵ That's what God intends.

Together with these parallels, the Vineyard Parable implies that grace has both spiritual and material implications. God's blessing is intended for both body and soul. Accordingly, Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in the United States, sees in this scripture a practical mandate for employers: "[Jesus] spoke of a living wage," she contends, a minimum income that guarantees the basics.⁶ **The highest economic priority, in other words, is to support everyone's flourishing, not to appraise each one's value.**

God is good, friends; so good, in fact, that we may be inclined to grumble. And, if you're still bucking against Jesus' parable a little bit, that's good. It means that the word is working on you, continuing to form you for life in the kingdom of heaven on Earth. **The good news, as always, is that you've been afforded the privilege of working in God's vineyard in the first place.** And the reward, as one interpreter puts it, "comes not from each worker's merit, not from the quantity or even quality of their labor, but rather from the gracious covenant offered by the one doing the hiring."⁷

⁵ Exodus 16:18; 2 Corinthians 8:15.

⁶ *The Long Loneliness*, as cited by Charles Campbell, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 95.

⁷ Kathryn D. Blanchard, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 94.