

17Pentecost, Matthew 20:1-16
Rev. Kimberly Glenn
September 20, 2026

Let us give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name; make known his deeds among the peoples. Amen.

As with so many of Jesus' parables, this gospel text presents a story that makes us uncomfortable. And it puzzles us. It makes us think. Why would Jesus, who is the embodiment of compassion and fairness, tell a story like this? It sounds to us like unfair labor practices. We wonder why the landowner would think this was okay. He asks the disgruntled laborers, "Are you envious because I am generous?" It's even more explicit in the original Greek text which translates literally as "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

After all, the laborers had been completely content with the wage that was offered to them when they were chosen from the pool of laborers to work. They were quite satisfied until they began comparing the generous wage with the generosity given to the workers who spent less hours in the field. When they begin looking sideways at one another, they lose sight of the fact that the landowner is a very generous man.

Aren't we satisfied with all that we have until we start looking at how much our neighbor has? We compare our achievements, our careers, our children's achievements and careers, our houses and our cars... and our boats! We even make comparisons to each other about our faithfulness. This tends also to be true of clergy as well as the laity. We say, "I served for x number of years, I gave up this or that for the church, I showed up even when I was tired. Through every challenge I have remained

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faithful, never questioning God's call. Why should someone who comes late to faithfulness receive the same amount of God's love that I receive?"

The problem isn't that God has stopped being generous. When it appears that someone who just started coming to church is receiving more generous attention from God, the profound reality of God's generosity with the rest of us is harder to see.

The first workers in the vineyard worked longer hours. But they were chosen first, brought out from the crowd of laborers first. That had to be worth something. They were chosen. They had a purpose. Their fortitude was recognized. They had been selected out of everyone else to be part of the landowner's team.

Think about the workers who were not chosen in that first round. There is a sense of loneliness in their being left out. They must have felt so unwanted. They were left behind. They probably felt defeated, even unneeded. The people who were depending on them would be so disappointed when they came home empty handed.

In the end, the first workers grumbled out loud when the last workers were paid the same generous wage that they had received. It seems those first workers had failed to recognize something. It wasn't that they HAD to work all day, it was that they GOT to work all day.

What if? What if being in the vineyard itself was part of the landowner's gift?

Paul's letter to the Philippians gives us a different way to think about the vineyard in the parable. Paul is writing the letter from prison. He used those times of isolation to contemplate the impact of his life-changing transformation from a zealous persecutor

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into a faithful Christ follower. At the time that he was writing, Paul's future was uncertain. He did not know what might happen to him next. Even in spite of that kind of stress and reason to doubt, his words in that letter are both profound and surprising. He says in the letter, "For to me, *living **IS** Christ.*" He does not say I live in order to earn Christ, or my disciplined faithfulness earns union with Christ. For Paul, the gift *is* the vineyard, the vineyard is the gift of life itself. The vineyard is the gift of the opportunity for a life lived with Christ himself.

For those who have followed Christ for decades, those years have not led simply to spiritual tenure or spiritual seniority. They have been decades of knowing Christ more intimately day by day. They have been years and decades of enjoying the fruits of the vineyard: communion together, forgiveness, true and honest friendships, the gift of being carried through challenging times of grief and loss. Paul knew, and we can know, too, that living the Christian life is not years of labor followed by a reward. Paul describes the Christian life as "Standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind," he says, "one mind for the faith of the gospel." It is years and decades of living with Christ that *is* the reward.

The workers in the vineyard are standing side by side comparing wages. Paul imagines that work as standing side by side serving Christ. The two images picture the same proximity between the laborers but Paul understands the labor, the human effort, from a different perspective. The parable asks, "What did they get for their effort?" Paul's letter asks, "What can we do together for Christ?"

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Jesus calls us away from looking sideways in comparison to each other so that we can stand beside each other, with each other in Christ. When Christ is at the center, another person's blessing no longer diminishes the blessing God has given everyone else. Welcoming another worker to the vineyard doesn't threaten my place there. Another person's grace does not reduce the grace given to me. God's generosity is vast, it is abundant, it is boundless. We can be happy whenever someone else receives a blessing. Their bounty does not diminish our own.

Perhaps Jesus is not merely asking us in this parable to appreciate the landowner's generosity. Perhaps he is inviting us to become generous ourselves. Paul says, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." What does that mean to us? It might mean becoming a people who stop calculating what everyone deserves and start asking ourselves what love can inspire us to give? Perhaps we can become the church that welcomes everyone and say there is a place for you with us, working alongside us with and for Christ.

Paul equates the vineyard with a life spent in communion with Christ. Some of us entered this vineyard early in the morning. Some came at noon. Some arrived much later. And some may be still wondering if there is still a task left for them to do. Perhaps we all should first consider who it is who called us here. The landowner who is God our creator called us here. His deepest generosity is not the tasks that are assigned, not the roles that we play in the vineyard, but that he called us into the vineyard at all.

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This parable leads us so naturally to the Lord's table, where the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, are served to all who come to it. Some of us have come here often, some would like to come more, some have wandered away from the table and come back. But when we all come forward to receive none of that matters. Those who have worked the longest do not receive a larger portion. Nor do those who have served most faithfully. We all are invited to come to the table and receive this sacrament side by side. We hold out our empty hands. And into those hands, God places the same extraordinary gift: the gift of Christ himself.

Paul says, "For to me *living is Christ*." I think maybe that is the great generosity that Jesus wants us to discover from this parable. He wants us to see that the vineyard is the gift of life. The work we share is a gift to God. The people who work beside us are equal participants in that gift. And at the center of all of it stands Christ, God's greatest gift of all.

So come to the Lord's table today - not to receive what you have earned, but to receive what God in his vast, abundant and boundless generosity has always wanted to give you: the spirit of the life of Christ himself.