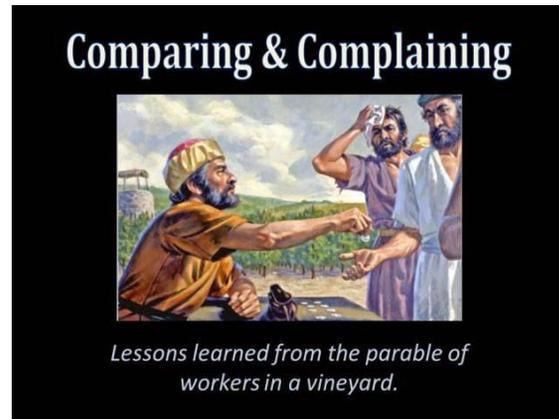


September 20, 2020

16th Sunday after Pentecost



St. John

United Church of Christ

10207 Lincoln Trail

Fairview Heights, IL

Telephone 397-6323

SECRETARY – JUDY HARTMANN

Rev. Rosemary Captain

Prayers and Liturgy by Rev. Lavon Bayler

ORGANIST – SHARON BANJAVCIC

ENVIRONMENTAL ARTS –

CAROL BULVA AND NANCY EISENHAUER

Lectionary Texts:

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45;
Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Call Nancy Eisenhauer to order your holiday masks. 618-971-5814

*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP: Based on Psalm 105
Call on God with praise and thanksgiving.

Tell of God's wonderful works.

Today we open ourselves to God's presence.

Let the hearts of all who seek God rejoice.

When we eat, we are reminded of God's provision.

When we drink pure water, we give thanks.

Surely God has blessed us with food and drink.

Daily we are strengthened for tasks we face.

We are guided by God's instructions and statutes.

We benefit from God's generosity.

Let all the people worship with joy!

Let all whom God has chosen worship together.

*UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION:

Glory to your name, holy God. We rejoice in your wonderful works, in miracles you have caused among us, and in the wealth you have entrusted to our stewardship. You have called us to important work in your vineyard.

Wherever we go, we represent your church and interpret your ways to those who observe our words and deeds. Enfold us in your presence and give us strength and courage to pass on the light

you have sent to illuminate our journey through life. We are eager to be fed by your Word today. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: **Matthew 20:1-16** “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, (a typical day’s wage) he sent them into his vineyard.

³ “Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I’ll pay you whatever is right.’ ⁵ And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. ⁶ Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

⁷ “‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied. “He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

⁸ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ ⁹ When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. ¹¹ When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² ‘These who were hired last worked

one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’

¹³ “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ ¹⁶ So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”



SERMON: **“What is the daily wage in the kingdom of heaven?”**

Let’s be honest. What did you think when you heard this parable? “What! That’s not fair! Why would you pay someone who works only one hour the same as the person who worked 8 hours? Jesus, what are you telling us?” Am I right?!

At the close of Matthew chapter 19, Jesus reminded his disciples that the kingdom of heaven would be radically different from the way things are in this world. In the culture where we live now, the theme is to get ahead of the next guy. Keep up or even be better than the Jones’s next door. “To the victor goes the spoils.” “Might makes right.” But Jesus is telling us that in a kingdom where God is

sovereign “the first will be last and the last will be first.” Matt. 19:30

To reinforce this claim, Jesus tells this parable that we have before us today. Perhaps the first task in interpreting this parable is to say what it is NOT. This is not how you should run your business. You should not give a kid who registers the last day of class an A when all the other kids have been in the class all semester.

No, the purpose of this parable is not to provide a practical guide for the management of any business. Indeed, the aim of this parable is to be monumentally impractical, to fracture so thoroughly our expectations, our customary patterns of practicality, that we are FORCED to think new thoughts – new thoughts about ourselves, about other people, and about God. It’s the story to SHOCK us into a different way of thinking, being, and acting.

This parable invites us to see the landowner as a symbol of GOD. This is not the same as saying that the landowner IS God; the connection is more poetic than that, but the way the landowner operates in the parable is intended to evoke in our imaginations something of the character of God.

Notice, for instance, that the focus of the landowner’s concern is always on the laborers, not on the crop or on his own profit. Ordinarily, one would expect the story to say that the landowner

hired some harvesters early in the day, but, when he found out that there was more crop than these first workers could handle, he went out to secure more help.

But, no, the story says that the owner hired more workers because he found them standing around, out of work (verse 3, 5, 6). In other words, the landowner is motivated by THEIR need for work, not his need for workers.



Especially notice the exchange with the five o’clock crew. When the landowner found them loitering in the market place, he asked them why they were there. They replied, “because no one needs us.” A normal employer would say, “so sorry. Try again tomorrow.”

But this is no normal employer. This divine landowner (remember the landowner represents God), employs even those the world ignores and forgets. As he surveys these idle folks who stand there like the leftover kids on a ball field whom nobody wants on the team, the land owner calls out graciously, “I can use you. You also go into the vineyard.”

This parable also encourages us to place ourselves in the shoes of the laborers and to rethink how we relate to God (the landowner). Notice how the various groups of workers operate out of quite

different agreements with the landowner. The early morning crew made a firm and clear contract for a regular day's wage before they would go into the vineyard. They wrangled a bargain for a denarius. The next three shifts of workers were less specific. They went to work after the landowner said he would pay them "whatever is right." All it took to get the five o'clock crew to work was the invitation to also go into the vineyard.

And, as expected, at the end of the day, when the landowner paid the workers, there was grumbling from the workers who had been in the field the longest. The landowner said, "friends, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the wage I gave you?"

The parable dramatically contrasts these first hour workers with those employed the last hour. The last hour crew – those who have waited in vain throughout the day for a call, those who are desperate and needy and who know it, those who realize that they would stand idle and useless all day were it not for the benevolence of the landowner, those who in relief and joy and trust respond to the command of the landowner to go – are given sheer grace.

The first hour workers, even though they don't recognize it, are also given grace; a day's wage, the sustenance of life. But grace is not their

framework. We have already seen that they are bargainers, contract workers. They think that life works according to deals and negotiations, they even strike bargains with the Almighty.

They count up good deeds, check their time cards, and divvy out their devotion with measuring



spoons. Their vocabulary is filled with cries of "I deserve" and "where's mine?" and "it is my God-given right."

The contrast could not be greater. The bargainers are working for a denarius; the latecomers are working for the landowner, for God. Both get what they are working for.

In the ordinary sense, all the workers get a denarius a typical daily wage for laborers. But this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, and we are compelled to think beyond the ordinary sense. What is a "daily wage" in the kingdom of heaven?

Suddenly we see plainly the true poverty of the first-hour workers. Everybody in the parable is tendered with the wealth of the kingdom: the deep river of God's love flows through everybody's life. God gives everyone a daily wage so extravagant that no one could ever spend it all. A deluge of grace descends on all; torrents of joy and blessing fall everywhere. And there these first-hour workers

stand, drenched in God's mercy, an ocean of peace running down their face, clutching their little contracts and whining that they deserve more rain.

Now the question is, what do we think of this kind of gracious God? What do we really think about a God whose basic character is mercy and forgiveness? When it is shown toward us, of course, we like it fine, but the test comes when God shows mercy to people we do not think deserve it.

When the landowner says to the first-hour worker, "Are you envious because I am generous?" he is really saying, "does my generosity expose the poverty of your own spirit?" In Jesus, the world sees the generosity of God, and everything depends upon how the human spirit responds to this divine display of good will. Some will see God's generosity as offensive. When God's generosity spills over the levees we have built to contain it and surges mercifully over the landscape of human life, we shout, "not fair!"

So, do we still think this parable is all about poor business practices or have we changed our minds. (Remember this is a story, not real life.) Can we accept a God who loves all people, even the people who we judge as being unworthy? Something to ponder and pray about. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with a time of silent, personal prayer.



Fresh as each morning you come to us, crafter of manna. Your grace rests gently upon us, waiting to be gathered, to become the bread of life we share throughout the day.

Fresh as compassion's justice, you come to us, Servant of the poor. Choosing to give as you desire, you show us the last, so we can make them first in our hearts and hopes. Doing no wrong, you make us right with God for all time.

Fresh as the water which turns a desert into a meadowland of flowers, Spirit of uninterrupted grace, you come to us.

When we would grumble, you give us the gospel to live out; when we would protest, you teach us songs of praise; when we would utter laments, you fill us with God's laughter. And we are grateful for all these gifts and blessings you give us, gracious God.

Today we add prayers for what is happening in our world. We pray for the people of the United States as we work towards equality and civility for us all.

We pray for the healthcare workers and first responders who have put their lives on the line to protect us. We have special prayers for the families who are dealing with loved ones who have been

diagnosed with COVID-19 and are not able to visit them in person for support. Give strength to the sick and to those who are struggling with separation. All these things we pray in the name of your son, Jesus who taught us to pray . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

THANK YOU FOR SHARING: God provides generously for all of us. We are blessed with pure water and nourishing food. We have found joy in the faith that sustains our spirit. We must always remember to expand the circle of opportunity as we share what God has provided.

UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION:

Receive our tithes and offerings to your honor and glory, loving God. May fruitful results occur through and beyond our sharing. Call us all into the vineyard of meaningful labor and constructive leisure, that your Word, living through us, may call our neighbors to joyous reunion with you. May we help one another to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

RESPONSIVE BENEDICTION:

May you know joy and progress in your faith.
May this be the week of spiritual growth for you.

May Christ dwell in us and among us.

May the faith of the gospel empower us.

In all your struggles, know that Christ is with you.
In all your labors, the love of God surrounds you.

Glory be to God's holy name.

Let all who seek God be assured and rejoice.

God surprises us and provides for us.

Trust and give thanks for God's wonderful works.

There is a song on our lips and joy in our hearts.

In Christ our suffering finds meaning.

Amen. **Amen.**

ST. JOHN PRAYER LIST: Gene Ganschinetz, Rich Schmitt, Nelson Libell, Dave Seneczyn, Eric White, Lori Riess, Charles Chamberlin, Donna Isselhard, Mitch Nallie, Candy Pearce, Greg Talley, Carol Meyer, Leah Williams, Pat Holtgrave, Jane Riess, Shari Hamilton, Charlotte Watson, Becky Ballard.

(If there are names on this list that you believe can be removed, call the church secretary.)

Our condolences to Janice Petroff on the death of her father, Tom.

