

**The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 20, 2020**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**

*“Working in the Vineyard”*

We're getting to that time of year when the summer heat and humidity are giving way to cooler fall weather. With that, people enjoy taking a drive and going out west to vineyards. On a nice Saturday afternoon, it's a beautiful drive through the rolling Virginia countryside, just enjoying the ride. Of course, the big draw is going to the vineyards themselves and sampling some of the wines that are available. All of this may look different this season because of COVID-19, but people who are tired of being at home and feeling cooped up are ready to go. If you are going out, please take the necessary precautions and be safe! In today's Gospel lesson we are out in the vineyard with Jesus' parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Some of those laborers have been out there all day in the heat of the day, and others only for an hour or two. Should everyone who's been working in the vineyard, whether long or short, receive the same wages? Not in our book, but in God's divine economy everyone receives the same, not matter how long they've been working in the vineyard. That becomes the theme for preaching today: "Working in the Vineyard." May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

I have never worked in a vineyard, and so I can't say first-hand that I know what this looks like. But in my growing up years, I did work outside on the farm doing all kinds of messy and stinky jobs in all kinds of weather. Just being outside on a hot day mowing the lawn or doing yard work gives us some understanding of what it must be like to work in the vineyard. It's hard work, and there is a small window of time that you have to bring in the harvest before it becomes overripe or bad weather sets in. This is why the owner of the vineyard brings in as many hired hands as he can find. He goes out early the first time, around 6AM, and hires the first batch of workers. He goes out again around 9AM (third hour) and hires the second group. He goes out again around 12 Noon (sixth hour) and 3PM (ninth hour), hiring still more workers. And finally he goes out one more time around 5PM (eleventh hour) and hires still more laborers. A denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer, and this is what the first laborers, those who worked the entire day, agreed to. It was standard business practice. What they didn't know is that this is what the vineyard owner was going to pay everyone, whether they worked one hour or the entire day. This was according to the law of Moses, which required that workers' wages not be withheld from them, even overnight (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15). And this is where the point of contention between laborers and owner is revealed. All of this may strike us as an abuse of the labor force; taking advantage of workers. Although it's never actually said in the course of the parable, the three words that sum up this interaction between the laborers and the owner of the vineyard are: "It's not fair." What the laborers did say is this: **"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"** (Matthew 20:12). When people think things aren't fair, or that they have been mistreated, they – that is, we – start grumbling, as in **"... they grumbled at the master of the house"** (Matthew 20:11). This word "grumble" (γογγύζω) is the same word that the Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX) uses to describe the children of Israel murmuring and grumbling not just against Moses and Aaron, but against the Lord (Exodus 17:3; Numbers 14:2, 27, 36). In the parable, as well as in our lives, comparing inevitably leads to complaining.

When all is said and done, we're not the vineyard owners; we are just laborers in that vineyard. We get a clear word from the Lord on this in today's Old Testament lesson – our Scripture memory verse for this week: **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"** (Isaiah 55:8-9). Whether we labor in that vineyard – the Lord's vineyard (see Isaiah 5:1-5) – brief or long, we all receive the same thing. Whether we come into the vineyard, the

kingdom of heaven, early or late in life, at the first hour or the eleventh hour, by the grace of God we all receive the same thing: the free gift of forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. To be sure, these are not “wages” in the sense that we earn them by what we do. The free gift of forgiveness of sins and everlasting life is received only by faith through the life-giving death of Jesus, the Son of God, who has purchased this for us by shedding his own blood on the cross. Because of this, with thankful hearts we can say with Paul the apostle in today’s Epistle lesson: **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account”** (Philippians 1:21-24). Until such time as we do depart this life and are with Christ in heaven, we are called to labor in God’s vineyard. Here in this corner of God’s vineyard where we are now placed, we work side-by-side, remembering also these words of Paul from today’s Epistle lesson: **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...”** (Philippians 1:27a). May it be so with each one of us.

The central character in this parable is not the workers, but the master, the vineyard owner. The harvest in the vineyard points us to that great and final harvest, the final judgment (Matthew 13:39). The issue which Jesus teaches in this parable is why the latecomers receive the same as those who came earlier to work. The truth here is that vineyard, the kingdom, is God’s gift to give, not ours to question. As the vineyard owner pointed out to those who worked all day, he was doing them no injustice. They received what they agreed to, all of which was standard wages for a day’s work. In fact, the vineyard owner went beyond conventional practice by paying a full day’s wage to those who worked only one hour– something which they certainly did not expect. Is that fair? No, but it is generous. The literal translation of the vineyard owner’s response to the grumbling is this: **“Or is your eye evil because I am good?”** (Matthew 20:15), meaning what appears in the text: **“Or do you begrudge my generosity?”** And so there is this upending of what we think is just and fair in Jesus’ upside-down kingdom as he tells us: **“So the last will be first, and the first will be last”** (Matthew 20:16). And so it is with all who work in the Lord’s vineyard – we all receive the same thing from the hand of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ.

As we work together in the Lord’s vineyard until that great and final harvest, may we grow daily in a spirit of joy and thanksgiving for what our Lord and Master has graciously and generously done for us, and for what He graciously and generously will bestow upon us when our labor is ended. Amen.