

Sermon Pentecost 16 A
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon
September 20, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

[Jesus said to the disciples:] “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

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On the night of the heist, the job of mastermind Danny Ocean is to distract casino owner Terry Benedict with a dispute about a love triangle, Meanwhile, electronics expert Livingston Dell sneaks in and substitute the closed circuit security footage of the casino’s vault with footage of the replica vault the team of crooks constructed in their hideout. Then, members of the team access the casino’s ventilation system to make their way to the real vault, which holds their prize of millions of dollars.

While Linus Caldwell and Danny make their way to the vault through the ducts, Saul Bloom, posing as a visiting arms dealer, sends a briefcase of “valuables” into the vault for safekeeping, which are really explosives prepared by expert Basher Tarr back in the lab.

Then the Malloy Brothers, disguised as maintenance staff, transport the briefcase of explosives on a money cart into the vault, along with acrobatic wonder, The Amazing Yen, who is folded into a human pretzel inside the cart. When Yen emerges, he employs his acrobatic prowess to leap from surface to surface within the vault to place explosives without tripping the hair-trigger laser sensors.

After the detonation, the team of experts successfully escapes with the money, splitting the 160-million heist 11 ways After watching this 2001 caper classic recently, someone paused, puzzled. “Wait. So one guy’s job was to carry a briefcase, and another guy’s job was to do acrobatics inside a loaded vault, and they both walked away with the same amount of money?” Doesn’t seem fair, does it?

We are wired to think about things that way, aren’t we? Those who put in more effort deserve more reward, right? Well - hopefully we’re not involved in dividing up the spoils of a heist - but when it comes for return for services rendered, we want to know that hard work will be rewarded fairly.

Jesus’ parable of the laborers and the landowner features some folks grumbling about a payout that doesn’t seem fair. Jesus’ followers wanted to know what they had to do, how much they had to give to live into the vision of

God's reign that he was laying out for them. So he paints a vivid picture for them about getting to work in the harvest of the kingdom. He tells them a story of a landowner who has work to be done, and of laborers ready to work. The ones hired at daybreak get paid the agreed upon wages. Then the ones that join later, and even the ones hired at the eleventh hour end getting paid the same wages as well. And those who spent all day working in the field had opinions about the others earning just as much as they did. And it's no wonder. Doesn't seem fair that those working less should get paid the same as those who did far more, does it? But the landowner stands by his decision.

Well, maybe those latecomers didn't labor as much as the first ones hired, but they showed up at the same time. At daybreak, they were there too, ready to work. Who knows why they were passed over during the morning rounds? Perhaps the harvest wasn't as robust this year to require so many laborers. Or maybe those passed over were new to town, unfamiliar... Or maybe their primary language or their skin color sparked a feeling of mistrust in employers. Or maybe their physical appearance didn't fit the mold of what the bosses expected.

We don't know why they were passed over in the morning. But no matter what the explanation, the fact is: they showed up. And according to the landowner who comes back to the marketplace, that's all that mattered: That they showed up. Workers who show up, according to him, should be put to work, and according to him, should earn a day's wage.

Now, remember, when Jesus tells this story, he prefaces it - just like all his other parables - with "The kingdom of heaven is like." And oftentimes when Jesus tells us what "the kingdom of heaven is like," it doesn't make a whole lotta sense, according to the way of the world. No, it wouldn't make sense for a business owner to hire workers for an hour and pay them a full day's wage. Just like it wouldn't make sense for a farmer to throw good seed on a path, rocky soil and among thorns, Just like it wouldn't make sense for a shepherd to abandon 99% of his flock to go find one lost sheep. Jesus doesn't tell these parables to advocate ludicrous labor practices.

But what he is doing is painting a picture of a whole new realm: The realm of heaven; the kingdom of God; where success is not measured by quantifiable outcomes, but the highest value is assigned to the last, the lost and the least. And today, Jesus is telling us, showing up matters. When a new day dawns in the kingdom of heaven, your worth is not measured by how much you do, what matters is that you showed up to stand in the sun.

When it comes to living out the reign of heaven here on earth, among the communion of saints, the church, believe me - there's plenty of work to do. There's meetings to attend, music to learn, and bulletins to print, And walls to paint and reports to write, and emails to send, and flowers to arrange, cups to fill, and classes to teach...But what matters most is just showing up.

So if you showed up today to drive-in worship, THANK YOU. And if you are watching this at home, so you can be one less person out there passing germs around, THANK YOU. If you showed up to work this week, to provide for your community, THANK YOU. If you stayed home and showed up for your family, THANK YOU. If you showed up to teach kids this week, even if it has been a marathon of mental and emotional acrobatics. THANK YOU. And if you showed up for someone who needed to hear a friendly voice, THANK YOU. Right now, it may feel like just showing up is the best we can do, even if that looks different than it used to. And according to Jesus, showing up is just as valuable to the kingdom as all the other work that keeps our hands busy.

That's hard to hear, for the 20% of the folks that reliably shoulders about 80% of the work around here. That small group that on any given day can be found doing the organizing and the planning and the cleaning and the mailing and the pruning and the calling. For the "worker bees" around here - no matter how cheerful - this kind of a parable can be challenging.

Because, no matter what this parable says, we still need you. In fact, we can't do without you. But despite the temptation to grumble, like those in the story who worked hard all day, the call of the kingdom is instead to celebrate grace. It was God's grace that got ALL of us up this morning - God's grace that gave you the will and the spirit to work - God's grace that covers ALL of us - Grace that calls us to show up. Being a citizen of the kingdom of heaven,

while living on earth, means realizing the value Jesus places on each of us, not the worth prescribed by the world. Living in the realm of heaven means putting the first last and lifting the last up to first place.

So this week, thank someone for showing up. Thank someone for being there, even if just being there is all they can muster. Let someone know that you appreciate them for showing up to their job even if it's hard and unglamorous work. Let someone know that you see what they have to offer, even if an employer doesn't. Thank someone for showing up this week for you. Let them know that you see them just as Jesus does - as the beloved child of God he gave his very own life for.

"I see you," Jesus says to those cast aside. "I value you," he says to those on the margins. "You matter." "Not because of what you do, but because of who and whose you are."