

What We Need

Matthew 20:1-16

A sermon by Zac Koons given at St. Mark's, Austin on September 20, 2020

This is not one of those parables that is shrouded in mystery and difficult to understand; where the disciples walk off scratching their heads wondering if they have made a huge mistake in following this Jesus because there he goes talking about death again. This parable is straightforward. Its lesson is easy to grasp. The kingdom of God is not fair. God does not reward people commensurate with the amount of work they put in. God instead is generous to all. God's grace is offered abundantly to each and every single person that shows up to the vineyard—whether they have been there since sunrise or whether they didn't arrive until just before sunset. The same salvation is offered to those baptized as babies as to those baptized on their death bed. The thief on the cross is invited into the same paradise as the mother of God. The kingdom of God is not fair—and thank God for that.

But I think there is more to the parable than what is obvious. This reading may be right and true, but it doesn't quite satisfy the niggling sense of righteous indignation we feel on behalf of the laborers who showed up early to the vineyard. God sounds a bit too much like Jeff Bezos for my comfort. So he's paying people \$15 per hour, great, but that doesn't sound all that great when you discover that he makes, according to one probably reliable website, around 9 million dollars an hour—which just in case you're curious breaks down to around \$150k a minute. Which is all to say, at the end of the parable, we are all left thinking the same thing: If I knew I was going to make one Denarius whether I worked one day or one hour, I obviously would have signed up for the hour. Who wouldn't?

The key, I think, to a deeper understanding of this parable, is not to get caught up on the money. Remember, this is a parable. A story of symbols and allegory. The question we should ask is what do the images and symbols in the parable stand for? God gives a lot of things. But in my experience, God does not give money. God has never given me money. Has God ever given you money? So what does the money stand for?

The landowner agrees to pay the first laborers one denarius. This is what it says in Greek—"one denarius." But our translation doesn't use the word denarius; instead, it does the interpretive work for us. Rather than telling us the amount of money, it just says, "the usual daily wage." One denarius was the average living wage in the Roman world. That's one important factor. Another important factor is who the landowner hires throughout the rest of the day. The text says that the landowner went back out at nine, and then noon, and then five and each time finds people "standing idle in the marketplace." When he asks them why they are idle, they explain that no one has hired them yet. They have not worked yet that day. We don't know why. Why doesn't matter within the logic of the parable. But the important thing to recognize is that because they haven't worked, they haven't earned any kind of living yet today.

So at the end of the day, the workers have worked different amounts of hours. They are different in that respect. But they are the same in that they are all in the same working class, and they all require roughly the same amount of money per day to live—one denarius. This may sound tedious, but the important point is this: At the

end of the parable, the landowner does not pay the workers according to the work they did, he gives them each what they need to live.

God does not give us what we deserve. God gives us what we need.

If we place our current predicament inside the world of this parable, I think this is a valuable thing for us to remember today. A lot has been taken away from us in recent months. We are looking towards a very uncertain future. But even still, God gives us everything we need.

Not everything we want. Not everything we need to be happy. But God gives us everything we need to be Christians. God gives us everything we need to be in relationship with him. God gives us everything we need to follow him. And following after Jesus is where true life is found. It is where true joy is found. God gives us everything we need to be fully human.

God gives us all the gifts we need: God gives us the gift of new life in baptism. The gift of sustaining grace in the Eucharist. God gives us gift of community, of family, in the Church. God gives us Scripture full of wisdom and truth. Most importantly God continually gives us his Holy Spirit, to guide and comfort us along the way, to equip us with talents and interests and passions and curiosities so we can make beautiful and holy things of the world.

Even still, some might say the same original objection applies: if God is going to give me all these things whether I work for one day or one hour, I think I would still rather work less.

This is an assumption that I believe COVID has made us all reconsider. Would you really rather be idle? Put the question the opposite way: If you know you're going to be given what you need no matter what, would you rather work, or would you rather be idle? Some of us have been busier than ever since COVID hit, but many more of us have discovered the misery and maybe even danger of idleness during this season of isolation. It doesn't take being idle very long to recognize that we are not meant to be idle; that it is not good for us. For all of us who complain about our jobs week in and week out, those of us who have spent long periods of time struggling to find work know having nothing to do is invariably worse than having bad work to do.

The point is, working in the vineyard is itself a good thing. And—another gift of the parable—I don't just mean work that you get paid for. I mean all kinds of work. I mean babysitting your grandkids. I mean turning your guest room into a home classroom for your now virtual students. I even mean the zoom grind of meeting after meeting with your company. I mean the home maintenance projects you have taken up since quarantine started. I remember very clearly talking to one of you early on in the pandemic and I asked how you were doing you responded by saying, "Thank God for weeds." That's precisely it. Even pulling weeds is better than remaining idle.

Actually, you can invert the natural objection to this parable. If we know God is going to give us what we need no matter what, doesn't that set us free to do whatever work we know needs most urgent doing? I'm not saying quit your day job and move to a monastery (though I'm also not saying that might not be something God is

calling you to consider). But I am saying that God is in the work. The landowner is in the vineyard. And so are the rest of God's Church. Where would you rather be?

There's lots of work to do. It doesn't matter what you have been doing up until now. It doesn't matter how long you have been standing idle. God only cares about what you do next. And he's calling you into the vineyard. What will you say?

Amen.