

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon Title: "There Is Enough Work and Room for You" (A Journey through Matthew)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

August 4, 2013

If you were a Pharisee listening to this story, you would have hated every minute of it. If you were a Sadducee (one of the elite and wealthy religious members) or if you were a chief priest of the temple, you would have tried to find everything wrong with Jesus' parable in Matthew 20. This is because Jesus lumps in the common person with the duly-ordained person, those who know everything about the Bible and those who barely know about the Bible. They all work in the same place: a vineyard. They all do the same work: pick grapes to make wine. It doesn't matter if one person worked from the crack of dawn or another person worked one hour before sunset, they all get the same wage. It doesn't matter if a Pharisee has worked for years to perfectly reflect the law of God or if a fisherman makes it to the synagogue when he can make it, they all receive the same wage at the end. For those who work hard at their godly practices and customs, it is a hard blow to discover that they get nothing more than somebody who goes to church on Christmas Eve and Easter every year.

It isn't fair. Jesus' parable makes the playing field uneven, and it just isn't fair that somebody who has been a Christian all his or her life doesn't get something extra than the person who accepts Christ just a few years before passing on. It isn't fair.

And I am going to stay on the point of this parable being unfair, because I have a slight bone to pick with Jesus when it comes to Matthew 20. Sometimes I am jealous of what other preachers are making monetarily, and I don't know why God isn't filling my pockets with money for all the service I provide. I realize that my complaint doesn't fit perfectly with Jesus' parable, but it does when it comes to the issue of unfairness, or what I perceive to be unfair. Just as the person working in the vineyard all day complains that he gets the same wage as the one working one hour, my beef is those preachers who are working alongside me, and somehow they are richer than I am. It's the same work for God's kingdom, but how is it that they have churches that fit 20,000 people and a mansion next to it with its own swimming pool and lake? When I first came to the church, the search committee offered me a helicopter to commute from home to work, but we are still negotiating the details.¹

Years ago televangelists hit the airwaves with their

¹ It's a joke: We jokingly talked about how much other big-name preachers make, and one of the people on the committee sarcastically suggested that the Session of Morrow Church could purchase a helicopter for me.

extravagant studio sets and extravagant clothes and extravagant make-up. They said that they could bless us, if only we paid for their prayer napkins and “holy water” from the Jordan. We knew they were making money hand over fist, robbing some people of their retirements, so we sort of wrote them off. Some of those preachers went to jail for certain indiscretions, and their reputations were trashed. But then Rick Warren hits the scene. He has a big, legitimate church in California. He has a big, legitimate book that people still use today. Joel Osteen took over his father’s ministry, and he has a big, legitimate church in Houston and big, legitimate book sales. We don’t view these preachers as charlatans as we might have the Jimmy Swaggarts and Jim Bakkers. Eddie Long and Creflo Dollar might be another story, but suffice to say people are going to their seminars and they are truly turning to Jesus Christ as their Savior. These ministries are saving people from addictions and abuses and pains and problems, not by purchasing prayer napkins but through assistants standing with people in need and praying with them face-to-face. So these preachers are making boatloads of money, and I have a beef with Jesus about it. Why is this? Is it that I am not faithful enough? Is it that I am not working hard enough? Are they more blessed than I

am, even though we work in the same vineyard?

My beef about unfairness could be anybody's beef with Jesus. Haven't we driven behind a silver BMW with the license plate saying, "Blessed," or had a slick black Mercedes-Benz coming your direction with the front plate saying, "God's Favor"? I saw another license plate on my way to the hospital, saying, "Don't Hate Because I'm Blessed." We've run into those people who live high on the hog, saying it is the Lord who has blessed them with unimaginable wealth. Just live a certain way, being faithful to God's cause, and you too will receive extra favor in the form of dollar signs. "Abraham was rich," is their logic, "and the Lord blessed him with so much more." David, Solomon, Nicodemus and even Job had money surrounding them, because they were faithful believers. So what about us? Don't our prayers count for anything? Doesn't our worship and service in God's name give us bonus points? Apparently not. Some people are working in the Beverly Hills of God's vineyard, while others are working in the part of the field that doesn't even have porta-potties.

We are getting carried away here. We are moving away to what Jesus is saying in his parable. This is one of my favorite parables, because it is so simple

and yet it smacks you right between the eyes. When Jesus starts with, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard,” you know you have to strap yourself in and get ready for the ride.

The wage that the landowner gives is one denarius. It is a set wage that any laborer would earn during Jesus’ time.² It was agreed upon by all employees living in the Roman kingdom that if you put in a day’s work, you will receive one denarius. No more, no less. It doesn’t matter if you are a fisherman, a carpenter, a person who makes olive oil, or a person who steps on grapes to make wine, the wage was the same. It seems as though the only ones who got away with a larger wage were the tax collectors, because they could take as much from their collections as they wanted, just as long as the Roman government got their share. The laborers cannot argue against the wage. It is a normal wage for everybody, generally accepted by everybody.

When Jesus begins his ministry, he says, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.”³ Jesus doesn’t offer a multitude of options for people to choose from; Jesus is not Walmart or Amazon, in which you may purchase any item under the same roof at any price. Jesus presents one option

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2*, cf. 245.

³ Mark 1:15.

to the kingdom: Repent and believe. Jesus might have described this option in different ways (“You must be born again”; “No one comes to the Father except through me”; “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”⁴); but it remain only one option. We cannot customize it to suit our needs. We cannot add to it, or subtract from it. We cannot throw it away and present to God another option easier for us. One option, one way for salvation.

And how hard it is for many to accept that one option. How many people cannot take the simple step of accepting Christ as their Savior, and God as their Father, and the Holy Spirit as their Counselor? They cannot believe it. They don’t want to acknowledge it. They laugh and make jokes and try to explain it away, saying it has no great effect on their lives. All they have to do is repent. Turn away from your miserable future. Consider a new way of life. Consider a God who loves us so much to remove our sin and give us abundant life. Step into the vineyard, and become a laborer with us. The employee benefits are great. The life insurance policy is awesome. The Owner of the vineyard, God himself, is looking for you. Let God find you.

⁴ Cf. John 3:3, John 14:6.

There is plenty of room for all of us in the vineyard. That is another beautiful feature of the kingdom of heaven: there is enough to go around. Jesus says that the owner of the vineyard goes out and selects people in the early part of the day. Those laborers go to work, but the owner knows that there is more space to fill. So he goes out again, at nine in the morning, at 12:00 noon, at three in the afternoon. There is still room to fill. At five in the afternoon, just one hour before the workday finishes at 6:00pm, the owner is still finding people to pack into his vineyard. There still is space to fill.

This is excellent news to anybody listening to this parable. There is room for you in God's kingdom. You will never find a sign saying, "No Vacancy," or "Sorry, We're Closed." The doors are always open. There is plenty of space to roam around in.

And that is good news to all of us who don't feel as though we fit in anywhere. We might not feel like we fit in with anybody in any place. We might not feel like we fit in with our friends. Yeah, we call them friends, because we don't have anybody else to hang out with. We don't think other people will want to be our friends. We might not fit in with our families. Too much drama, too many arguments, so little love. We might not feel we fit in at work or at school, in the

neighborhood, in a crowded store. We feel awkward and alone. We cannot explain it, but we just don't feel right. We struggle with feeling right, and feeling comfortable.

However, we have a place. God welcomes us to his place. There is space for everybody who wants to enter. The Owner knows our name in the vineyard. He knows our innermost thoughts and our deepest struggles and joys. The Owner has something for us to do that will please him and benefit the vineyard, the kingdom, in big ways. Just when we thought we didn't have a home, we do with God. The young and the old, the rich and the poor, the abled and the disabled, the member of a church for 25 years and the first-time visitor. There still is space to fill. God is packing them in. Answer the call and come on in.

God is so generous. Our God's got a big heart along with large open hands and a long toothy smile. God doesn't wait for us to come to him. As the parable illustrates, God goes out to us. God looks for us high and low. God awakes us up from our laziness and gives energy to our bodies to do some good work for him. God loves to find laborers for his vineyard.

For any other situation, you have to qualify to get the job. You have to have the right education, the

right experience, the right motivation. If you don't have those, you might as well interview somewhere else. To enter the university you want to attend, you have to prove yourself with perfect grades, and you have to get the highest score on your PSATs and SATs; and you have to show your service hours to the community to prove you are the perfect citizen. You then have to fill out a college application with essay questions. You have to make yourself sound bright and intelligent in 1000 words or less. After doing through all of that, you still might not get in. You may have to go to that school, which was your second or third choice.

We don't have to qualify for God's vineyard. Jesus makes that perfectly clear in his parable. God is on the search for people – you and me – to enter his kingdom, and he will take anybody. It is not because God is desperate for people, and he'll take what he can get. It isn't because God's standards are low. It is because God loves us all. We are his children, and the Father will always love his children. The Father wants his children close and secure. He has a better life for us all. He has work for us to do (whatever your education or experience), and he trusts us with the work to do. All we need to do is answer the call. Follow the Owner to his vineyard. Accept the most

generous wage that he will offer.

And then, go to work. Enjoy that work alongside other thankful laborers, who answered the call, who were accepted into God's rich and vibrant kingdom, and who also have an excellent wage waiting for them.