

Matthew 20:1-16

'For 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 market-place; 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.'

"Who Could Ask for Anything More?"

Rev. Dr. Eugene L. Lowry

September 21, 2008

Good morning. It is a delight to be here, an absolute delight to be here, not only to catch up with Dave Dalke, that we've known forever. By the way, you may want to know more about him than you've known already, and I will be available after the service. Each service, actually. It is wonderful to be here and to meet your pastor Chuck Schuster. I could already feel the sense of leadership here, and I sense the great capacity to welcome people in. This is a wonderful place, and good heavens, do you have any idea how blessed you are with the music you get here? Are you aware? I mean, the direction, the keyboards, the choir, and every time I walk down the hall and someone will say, "There's so-and-so, first chair in the symphony, here's this person," I mean, the place is just full of wonderful talent, gifts and graces. So it's a particular delight to be here. Actually, we've been here before, but it was a long time ago, and it's wonderful to return.

Now, about tonight. Essentially, tonight is a lecture-concert. That is, I talk a while, and then I play a while, and then I talk a while, and then I play a while. It lasts an hour and five minutes, or something like that. Essentially, what I do is, I tell the story by words and music, of the birth of jazz and its relationship to the life of the church. There are a lot of people who don't know there's any connection between the birth of jazz and the life of the church, so I love to tell the story. So anyway, I hope to see you tonight for that experience, and all the other things that we're doing this weekend. Thanks for the invitation, and the welcome this weekend.

We turn to the text, and I want to say about the text, the 20th chapter of Matthew, and I do want to say about that, this happens to be the lectionary passage for this Sunday. I don't always preach on the lectionary. I preached on it last Sunday, next Sunday I won't, and we won't go into why. At any rate, this happens to be the lectionary passage, which means that this is the passage that's being read all across the globe, in Catholic churches, Presbyterian churches, Methodist churches, etc. etc. And so, you can just try to imagine how many millions of people will hear and deal with this text, this day, beginning with the first verse of the 20th chapter.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for the vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about the ninth hour, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” And 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. You've 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, last.” This is the Gospel of our lord.

It was about a quarter till seven. The owner of the place went to the marketplace. That's where you go to get workers for the day. He found a bunch of people there waiting for work, and they agreed on a denarius, that's the usual daily wage. And so they head off to the vineyard to work. It's an eleven-hour day. Well, about nine o'clock, the owner goes back to the marketplace and sees others, and hires them. I haven't figured that out, why didn't he get them at seven? But never mind. Well, about a quarter to twelve he goes back. Now I am getting concerned. Why didn't... well, maybe the weather changed, and therefore he needed more workers for the rest of the day. Whatever, he gets some more workers, and at three he goes back and does the same thing. But what I cannot believe is that at five o'clock, one hour before finishing time, he goes to the marketplace and sees people there, says “Why are you here idle all day?” And they said, “Because nobody has hired us.” And he said, “Well, I'll hire you. You go too.” So they work. They didn't even need the deodorant for the day. They worked only an hour, and it's six o'clock now, and the owner of the place turns to the CFO and says, “It's time for you to pay the laborers.” And, by the way, start with the last ones first.” And so they get in cash this denarius. They can't believe it, they're ecstatic to think that they're getting the equivalent of a full day's

wage. You think they're excited, you should think about the seven o'clock folks. "Oh, you mean he's going to pay a denarius per hour? We'll get about half a month's wages this way." They're thrilled out of their gourd. Until they pay the three o'clock folks, and then, "Well, something's wrong here." Surely the owner will turn back to the CFO and say, "No, no. They worked three hours. Not one, three." No, they get one denarius. And so do the noon folks, and so do the nine o'clock folks. By this time, the seven o'clock folks are getting a little steamed up about the situation. And finally, at last, the ones who came the earliest get paid the last, and they are paid one denarius.

The text said they grumbled. You know, I think the reason they put that? Because they couldn't print what they said. That's what I think. It said they grumbled, and they made clear why. They said, "You've made them equal to us who've borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. It isn't right, it isn't right to treat us the same as though we did the same work. We did eleven times the work of the last in. It's not right." And you know what, I think they have a point. "Now wait a minute, didn't we have an agreement at a quarter till seven? If I remember correctly, I said I'd pay you the normal daily wage and you said yes, we'd be happy for that. But you're not happy now?" "Oh, well, it's not the same now. Justice is relative justice, you understand." He says, "Now, by the way, don't I have a right to do with my money what I please?" And I just want to say, on behalf of the seven o'clock folks, no, not if you're an employer. You do not have the right, no you don't. This is a good case of the National Labor Relations Board. It isn't right.

So, for example, suppose that you're on a school board here, you're hiring a couple of wonderful, equally talented and equally prepared teachers for second grade. One is male and one is female. Of course you will pay the male more than the female. Isn't that right? Because it's harder to get men to teach the second grade, of course. No? Of course you wouldn't. That would be wrong. You know it's wrong. Or you have a small business and you hire a couple of people to work in the shipping department, and one is Caucasian and the other is a person of color. You will pay one more than the other, of course, because some have it easier getting jobs. No, you know better. You know better than that. At face value, at least, this has to be wrong, to treat them the way he's treated them. It's unjust. Clearly, in the business world, this is unjust. And besides it being wrong, it's also crude. You notice that he forced the seven o'clock people to wait, and be the last ones paid. Now, that is crude, it's also stupid. That isn't what he should have done. He should have paid the seven o'clock people first, and get them out of his hair, right? Then pay the nine, then the twelve, then the three, and then the five. Then he's free and clear, you know? It's just crude and rude to make them wait to get the same as the one-hour employee. It's also stupid in a deeper way, because guess what's going to happen to the owner tomorrow morning, about a quarter till seven, eh? He's at the marketplace looking for workers – ain't nobody there. No, but he'd better come back around a quarter till five, don't you think? There'll be lots of folks there looking for work about that time, yeah.

Putting it this way, it seems there surely is some ingredient to Jesus' story that we haven't quite found out. Because otherwise, this is – he's making a hero out of a person who's an unjust employer. Surely there's something else going on. Indeed there is. Yes, indeed,

there is, and you get the clue to it in the previous chapter, the last few verses of Chapter 19. That's the place where they tell the story, some of you remember the story, of the rich young ruler. Do you remember the story? He's in three of the gospels, he's always rich. One time he's a ruler, one time he's young, but he's always rich, wealthy. He comes up to Jesus and he talks to Jesus about the state of his soul with himself and with God and with others, and seems to be all right, except for one little thing. Jesus points it out. He says, "You're also filthy rich." That's not the way he put it, "You're rich. So what I need you to do is for you to go get rid of all your money, and then come back, and then we'll talk, okay?" And he goes away, it said, sorrowfully. Well, I should think sorrowfully is the way to speak of it. Meanwhile, the disciples are all experiencing this event, this conversation between the two, and they can't believe it. Why would he let a prospect like this get away? You know, they just came back from a church growth seminar, and you don't do this, if you want to fill the pews of the church. I mean, you don't ask for too much. You get them in, then you get their money, isn't that the way it works, congregation? Then you get the money. Don't ask for too much, they're going to go away. And they can't believe that he would do such a thing as this.

He sees their shock, and says, "Truly, I say to you that it will be easier for a big fat camel to get through the eye of the needle, then it will for one who's rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven." And don't demythologize that, he's not talking about the gate of the city and the camel has to.... He means what he said. It'll be easier for a big fat camel, humps and all, to get through the eye of the needle than it will for one who's rich to get into the kingdom. To which then the disciples say, "Good heavens that's impossible. What an irony." Jesus comes back and says, "With people, it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible." Do you hear the good news? With God, all things are possible. But they missed the good news. Here comes Simon Peter, waltzing up with one foot in his mouth, looks a little funny that way, and he comes up to Jesus and he says, "But Master, we've left everything to follow you. What do we get?" Do you hear the calculation? He thinks it's a bargain basement deal. And he says, "We've left it all for you. What's the payoff? I mean, you earn it, you ought to get it, right?" That's the way the world works – we've left everything to follow you, what do we get? And you know what Jesus' answer is, because of this story? He says, "I'll tell you what you get. If you're in a calculating mood, I'll tell you what you get. You get cheated, that's what you get." And tells this story to indicate just how cheated you're likely to be. Because if you think this is just a reward for services rendered, and so forth and so on, no, you're going to get cheated, and this is how much.

But you know that notion of a contractual thing where we earn our way and then get to heaven or whatever, that's still been with us. I remember, in the little church that I mentioned last night, Wesley Church, I remember a couple of conversations among old folk, well, they don't look old now to me, as I think about it, but they did then, the conversation goes something like this: "You know, it just isn't right, it just isn't right. I mean, we, who've been faithful members of this church, committed to Jesus Christ, and walking in his steps, following carefully how we live, caring for justice and for righteousness and for honest and...." I think there's also, not said, but also, hopelessly dull – anyway, "It just isn't right, you know? Is it possible that when we get to heaven,

here's this bozo out here, never comes to church, doesn't care about honesty, just does his own thing, it's me me me me, do you mean to tell me that he can get sick at the end of his life, get on his deathbed, and have this big humungous conversion experience and say, "Oh, Jesus, take my life," do you mean to tell me that when we get to our just reward, that we're going to run into this bozo, and he's going to get the same that we get? It just isn't right." You hear it, don't you? "Isn't fair."

Actually, sometimes it turns into a tragedy. Just imagine now that you're at a district meeting. They have one every year in some places, those who are in charge of education here and stewardship here, and building here, you go to different little rooms in somebody's congregational building, and you don't know most of the people because they come from other churches in the district. You get there, everybody's in a circle, you're in this one, and the chair says, "We know we don't know everybody here, let's go around the circle and just give us your name, and what congregation you're from, for this district meeting, and something about you." So they go around the circle, they get around to this man, and he says, "Well, I'm so-and-so, and I come from such-and-such congregation," and he says, "I used to be a plumber." Hello, what was that he said? "I used to be a plumber." What's he saying there? I'll tell you what he's saying, he's saying I have no noun. I used to be somebody. I used to bring home the bacon. You see, I had a contract, and the kind of contract I had, had to do with plumbing. I had a contract, but it ran out. I had the contract, but I'm not bringing home the bacon. I'm not being productive. Now, I'm a nobody. I used to be...." Do you hear the tragedy? I used to be.... You go around the circle a little more, and this woman kind of looks down, and she begins, she says, "Well, I'm so-and-so from such-and-such a church, and I'm just a housewife." What does she mean, "I'm just"? Well, it means that she's not bringing home the bacon, I mean, financially. You know. Actually, she is bringing home the bacon in a literal way. In fact, then she gets to cook it. And then she gets to serve it. And then she gets the complaints when it didn't cook correctly. And then she gets to clean up after it, and then she gets to do it over again for breakfast the next time. Over and over. But there's no cash in that. Do you hear it? Oh, it's tragic to think that life is essentially a contract, and if you ain't bringing home the bacon, you're nobody.

Well, just imagine, if you will. Just imagine, right now, you're a parent of three children, you got it? Three. There's one nine years old, one six, and one three. Now, I want to ask you a question. You do love the nine-year-old three times as much as you love the three-year-old, isn't that right? Of course, because they've been three times as much help around the house. Well, you might cut it a different way. All right, it that won't work, think of yourself as the nine-year-old. You do love your parents three times as much as when you were three, correct? Because you've seen how wonderfully they model parenting. No, you say, that's crazy talk. That's crazy stuff. This is family, this is family. Exactly. This is a covenant, not a contract. Bingo. You see? We're not talking a business deal. Now, Simon Peter thought it was a bargain basement business deal. It ain't no business. If it were a business deal, it would be right, the guy would have been wrong. This is not talking about business, this is talking about the covenant. This is talking about family. Everybody in those days knew the vineyard, what the vineyard of the lord meant. It meant God's chosen, the people who are invited into the reign of God. It's the family

of God. Everybody knew that. In fact, as a matter of fact, guess where the owner of the vineyard is right this moment. Well, he's at the marketplace, do you want to know why? He's wanting to make sure there isn't anybody who hasn't gotten the invitation. So you see, it really doesn't matter whether you got invited at seven or at nine or twelve or three or maybe five or maybe yet today. It doesn't matter when you got the gracious invitation, named and claimed as part of the people, it doesn't quite matter, you know, when you got the invitation. The truth is, to be invited into God's vineyard is to be invited home. Who could ask for anything more?