

## March 5, 2023: This Day's Sermon – Laborers in the Vineyard

Readings: Matthew 20:1-16; Psalm 16:1-8

© Rev. Janet Kettering, Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Boulder, Colorado

**Let us pray:** *Most-gracious God, we give thanks that you meet us in our need and invite us to join in tending the vineyard of your dream. We face the uncertainty of our future with the certainty of your presence, trusting that You meet us where we are and call us as your own. We pray this truth in Jesus' name. Amen.*

For the kingdom of heaven is like ... what? It is likely that many of those hearing Jesus' words on this day were day laborers like those depicted in the parable. Some were undoubtedly debt-ridden and homeless.

These laborers would have shown up in the market place early in the morning – around 6 a.m. – with the hope of being hired for one denarius; the minimum daily income to keep a small family fed and housed and clothed.

On the days in which they did not get hired, their recourse was to spend their time begging to make up for the lack of a living wage. With a willingness to work long hours in the scorching sun caring for the vines, tending to the grapes, these workers showed up day after day; and, yet, from a societal perspective, they were viewed as expendable, with little or no value when they're no longer needed.

This day would have been like any other. As noted by Kimberly Wagner, Asst. Professor of Preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, these workers lived out their days just trying to make ends meet. As they faced the same challenges day after day, they no doubt found it hard to imagine anything beyond their present circumstances. It is very possible that they believed that God's future was just their present, but maybe a little better.

Into this mind set Jesus steps, interjecting a renewed, ridiculous and holy imagination. As the laborers gather in the town to await the work necessary to feed their families for just one day, the landowner himself arrives. Not the manager – the landowner.

His agreement with those first hired is to be expected: The usual daily wage. Consistent with the nature of parable, the story takes a turn as the landowner returns again at nine, then noon, then three, and yet again near the end of the work day. For these workers, the agreement is payment consistent with "whatever is right". In the world of someone struggling to survive, something – anything – was better than nothing; and into the vineyard they went, without even knowing the definition of "whatever is right".

Beyond the radical twist of the last being paid first in an amount equal to the first, it seems there is another aspect of

this parable that can easily be missed: The fact that the landowner returns to the market place again and again and again. Each time seeing the workers waiting; each time offering them a place in the vineyard; each time providing something that would get them through that moment and that day.

Like the day laborers in this parable, we meet each day with an attitude that can swing like a pendulum: From hope to despair and back, depending on the circumstances we – and those we love – face.

As I read this parable in this light, it seemed to me that one of the answers to what the kingdom of heaven is like is the promise that God keeps showing up for us. Whatever our circumstances, whatever our need, the nature of God is that we are not expendable. We are not – and we cannot – be forgotten, regardless of how expendable – how invaluable – we may feel in this moment in time.

In my search for hymns for today, I stumbled across proof of the promise God makes for us and for all of creation in the words of the Prophet Isaiah: The promise that we are not forgotten. (If you'd like to view the hymn, here it is:

### Project of Love

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=5lhQ94oDXFw&si=EnSIkaIECMiOmarE>

It felt like a timely reminder on this second Sunday in Lent, as we are invited to return to our Creator, remembering that, in Christ, we are made free. In returning to the God who meets us where we are, we are invited to participate in the work of the vineyard that is God's dream for the world.

The world around us – the very time and place and circumstances in which we each find ourselves right now – is the vineyard of God's dream for creation. It is into that vineyard that God calls us to live in hope and bear hope forward.

Truth be told, as we look at the world around, as we experience our own pain and fear and questions, we can wonder if this is all there is. As we journey with each other through the changes of our lives – declining health, finding new homes; waiting for test results and hoping for life-giving answers – we need a reminder that we do not journey alone.

We find that reminder in each other and in God's word of promise and hope. The word that rises above and stands in contrast to the world's expectations. The word that is grounded in the mercy and love and generosity of God that is beyond our comprehension – beyond our understanding; except for those moments when we actually experience it.

The vineyard work into which we are invited is to recognize God's presence in our lives when we experience it and to use it to bring life to those around us. Life for this moment. This day. This vineyard of life is full of people who are hungry. It is full of people in need of knowing that they matter – that they are not expendable.

This is the vineyard we are called into as followers in the Way of Christ. This is the work to which we are called. Not to meet every need for every person for every day; but to meet the needs of those we meet for this moment and this day.

Another aspect to this parable is the many ways people pass through our lives that need help. The vineyard owner does not know these people. Some of them may be there tomorrow; some may not be. Some may be residents; others may be transient workers in need of food for the day.

In the same way, there are people who will pass through our lives seeking help. We may never see them again. They may worship or share a meal with us or they may not; and we never know what gift or blessing or contribution they may bring with them. Remember, the fact that someone is without a home or without a job or without a sense of self, does not mean they lack the ultimate value that God gave them at their creation. Our value is not found in *what* we are; it is grounded in *who* – *and whose* – we are: God's beloved children, created *with love; for love*.

It is grounded in who we are together. We touch a life — a life touches ours and it remains and moves with us wherever we go. A beautiful example of this is our friend, Brett. He is the artist who painted the picture hanging on the wall over there, depicting the shared relationship between Shepherd of the Hills and Pardes Levavot: an "orchard of hearts" leading to the Cross.

Brett is both a transient in our lives and he is a settled part of us. The sharing of his gift as an artist is proof of his value, his existence, and our relationship. He is still in Jackson, Wyoming, working a job tending animals. He is still bearing his gifts into the world through his sketches and artwork. The relationship we continue to share with him, even as it ebbs and flows, is proof of God's presence with us in relationships.

God's presence reveals itself in the work we do in the name of God; work that carries forward into the world even as we pass through it. Even as we face an uncertain future, we face it with the certainty that God is with us. The God of love that calls us to live in hope. The hope that bears life in whatever form is needed to the people we encounter.

To family, to friend, to stranger, and to those who think differently than we do, we offer "what is right" in the moment. It might be a box of diapers or some wipes donated to the Community Infant Program or a can of soup or box of cereal for the Little Free Pantry. It could come in the form of a phone call or visit to someone who is struggling with life changes, health concerns, or simply feels like they are expendable. It may be as seemingly insignificant as the assurance of prayer for someone who is struggling because, in reality, no action we take in God's name is ever insignificant.

Our gifts may be small at times or more significant at others. They are all gifts offered in the name of God. Like the owner of the vineyard, we give what we can and receive what we need.

*Amen*