

Exodus 16:1-5

1 The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. 2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” 4 Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. 5 On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.”

Philippians 1:21-30

21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26 so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. 27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, 28 and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. 29 For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— 30 since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

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. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6 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?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 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.’ 9 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.’ 13 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? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

This parable of Jesus, the parable of the “Laborers in the Vineyard” or “The Master Seeks His Workers” from the Gospel of Matthew again overflows with wisdom for navigating through life, and for relating to God and our fellow humans.

Before we get to the parable though, let’s first take a moment to consider the Bible itself. Unique among all the books ever written, the Bible (which is itself a collection of books) has an amazing way of inviting its readers to enter into its story, for God’s story to be written into our own stories, and for us in our turn to contribute to the continued writing of God’s story, as our hearts are inscribed and transformed through the perfect love of God -- this perfect love as revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord, the Messiah of the Jewish people, as he is revealed in these texts of the Bible. The love of God as displayed in Jesus has a contagious quality - its depth and riches grow ever deeper and richer in the sharing with and among others.

Immanuel, God with us!

Even as we seek to immerse ourselves more fully into God’s story, we know that the Biblical texts proclaiming God’s love and grace as we read them today are layered. As a historical figure, Jesus lived and taught in 1st century Palestine, in an area of the world we now know as the Middle East, modern-day Israel and Palestine. He drew very large crowds, and he taught his followers through the stories he told, his sayings, his confrontation of religious leaders, and through his example of humble service, healing, and grace. His first followers only wrote Jesus’ sayings and stories down many years after his trial and execution at the hands of the governing authorities and religious leaders of the day. We know that at least two of the original Gospel writers were writing what they had heard secondhand from those who had walked with Jesus, or that they took earlier writings and used them as their sources. While early Christian tradition holds that Matthew was the tax collector Matthew from the stories, even his intent and original audience, his way of telling the story, of putting

certain stories together, all contribute to how the story reaches our ears and eyes today, as would the work of any writer.

Further adding to the complexity, we have our own layers to peel through even now: our cultural filters, biases, social and historical constructs to keep in mind as we consider applying this word of the Bible to our day and age. So, not only are we reading interpretations of earlier events and stories, but our versions of those interpretations are translations into English from the original Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew texts. And yet, despite all these meandering paths to finally reach us today, 2,000 some years later and halfway around the world, Jesus' audacious words still reach our ears, words like these, which he never even wrote down: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35). Would you ever consider saying such a thing? And so here we have the Bible.

Jesus' original hearers and disciples, his original audiences and those who follow him about the countryside, are composed mostly of poor people, people impoverished, excluded, and exploited under the oppressive rule of a foreign power, the Roman empire, or cut off from society through systems of religious exclusion that deemed many of them "sinners." His words to these people so oppressed are words of life, given to bring hope and strength, godly identity to the forgotten, vulnerable, and exploited, the promise of dignity in the sight of God and under his blessing in the face of the impersonal, violent, and blasphemous powers that held sway over their lives in that day and age, as we touched on last week.

But perhaps the most extraordinary quality of Jesus' words is their marriage with his actions; each is entirely consistent with the other. And here again is the Bible's miraculous invitation to us today: **to bring our world-weary, faltering, and failing hearts to receive God's embrace**, recognize our ways are wrong in light of God's kindness, repent of them, yield to God, and so invite the victorious life and love of Christ to guide and direct our

steps, to overflow with the joy that only Christ can bring. With God, even our weaknesses serve a purpose, to remind us that our strength is found only in God. Can it be any other way for us created beings, who have nothing of our own, at the end of the day? Our mission then as followers of Jesus becomes a growing and deepening pursuit to express God's love to others, even our enemies // to lay down our own false projections and sinful responses toward them, lay down our "rights" in the human sense, and humbly bid them know God's radical, unfailing kindness and grace, the image of God inscribed on them, and calling to them as well, even as that message of love is written on our own hearts and minds through this refining process. We are all, after all, children of God, if we would only remember that and let that be our guiding reality. Can there be a more beautiful and inspiring way to live than this? But how? Let's look at the parable and see what insights are there, beneath all those layers.

Our text from Matthew today is tied to the story and last lines of the chapter just preceding it, sandwiched between the almost identical repetitions of: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Just prior to this parable, a young, rich man has just turned away from Jesus' invitation to sell all he owns, give to the poor, and follow him. The disciples are amazed when Jesus says how hard it is for the rich to enter into the Kingdom of God, and Peter asks Jesus what the disciples' reward will be, for forsaking everything and following him. Jesus tells him that he and the disciples, at the renewal of all things, will have positions of authority over the people of God's Kingdom. Then he says: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Now our parable. "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." This

part is great! We could stop right here and talk for the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, but alas, our time here is short. If we equate the landowner of the vineyard to God, then we can extrapolate the idea that God is actively seeking workers “early in the morning.” It stands to reason then, that if the workers are actively seeking God as well, then they and God will meet. Are you seeking God in the early morning hours? If not, you may just meet God there, if you do. The Bible has much to say to commend a practice of early morning prayer. In Mark 1:35, we read: “In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” On other occasions he prayed through the night, and the Bible records that he often withdrew to solitary places to seek the Father’s face. Psalm 63:1 reads: “O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water.” (NKJV) And Proverbs 8:17 reads: “I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me.” (KJV).¹

I’m not sure about you, but it’s not always my first and most joyous thought, to get out of bed at first light, and it’s not every day that I *feel like* getting out of bed, but making a practice of rising up early in the morning is a powerful expression, even, of love, and a powerful discipline to train the body and soul to follow the direction of the Spirit. It is a question of will, and not a feeling, which brings love to bear. Love is not based in feelings, not in emotions, but grounded in God’s very being, since God is love. And so, reaching out to God while in bed without getting up (because I don’t feel like it) usually for me means I’ll fall back asleep.

It just does not have the same effect as taking those decisive steps to toss back the covers, put my feet on the ground, shuffle to another room, open my Bible (app), and bring myself into God’s presence and read the Scriptures. I focus my breathing, repeatedly filling my lungs to their capacity

¹ Each of these uses שָׁחַר shâchar, shaw-khar'; a primitive root; properly, to dawn, i.e. (figuratively) be (up) early at any task (with the implication of earnestness); by extension, to search for (with painstaking):—(do something) betimes, enquire early, rise (seek) betimes, seek diligently) early, in the morning).
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H7836&t=KJV>

and emptying them, listening for God, and there in the wee hours, I confront the tendency of the mind to wander. In these early morning sessions, I often find that my mind attempts to remind me of everything in the world to be fearful and anxious about for the coming day, or all the ways I failed yesterday, or, or, or, (it's not always the friendliest place for me to be, in my head). But then, through prayerful perseverance, a quiet and pervasive peace begins to lay claim to me and wash over my soul, and the worries melt away in the steady calm of God's radiant love and promises. Psalm 46:10 teaches: "Be still and know that I am God." Soon I find that I am awash in peace, and it's a joy to hold people and situations up before God, knowing that God is present even in those prayers.

These proactive steps and habits counter the negativity, the inertia, and train the body that it, the soul and mind are not ultimately in charge, but rather are secondary to God's direction as given through the Holy Spirit, whose mark and seal is the peace of God which transcends all understanding. Rising up early in the morning to pray and meditate on Scripture can set the tone for the rest of the day, inscribing the mind with God's promises (which are amazing, by the way!) and instilling a practice of laying our burdens down before the Lord in the quiet spaces of the heart and mind. Anxious thoughts, accusing voices and mocking spirits cannot lay claim to a mind and heart that is filled with the peace of God, a mind and heart which are resting in God's promises to renew their strength.

Now, work and life schedules vary and don't always allow for an early morning routine, and this is by no means a prescriptive formula - there are any number of other ways to train the heart and mind that God is first in our lives. This is a great topic for small group discussion.

As we explored earlier, and as best as we can tell, Jesus' original audience is composed of mostly poor people with little to no recourse before the governing and religious authorities of that day. And so, when we read of these day laborers in the parable, we can be certain that the original

hearers of the story would immediately recognize the scene he lays out here. These day laborers represent the poorest of the poor, and while they do have their strength to commend them, they do not belong to any household as servants or slaves (and would not have the household's protection to tide them over, to give them food). If they had belonged to a household they would not be out looking for work in the marketplace. Their condition is precarious: they and their families would go hungry if they do not find work from one day to the next.

The landowner, for his turn, is anxious to find workers at this point, since at the time of harvest, he faces the imminent prospect of the seasonal rains, the advent of which would ruin the grapes that remain on the vines. Even an hour's work is crucial at this time of year, since the rains could arrive at any moment, so he has a strong motivation to keep going back to the marketplace throughout the day, where he could find laborers. The wage the landowner offers them is enough to feed the workers and their families for that day and no more, leaving them no way to save money. The workers whom the master meets at 9am, 12 noon, 3pm and 5pm, are all earnestly seeking work as well, since they and their children will go hungry if they remain idle. The master in the story knows this too, when he sends them to work in his vineyard.

The final section of our parable today notes the workers' complaint that the landowner has been unfair by giving those who arrived later on the same pay that the earlier ones received, though the early arrivers had borne the heat of the day. God's justice is not human justice. Human notions of fairness and justice only lead to injustice, as we see in our world today, where 50% of the world's wealth is concentrated in the hands of 1% of the population, according to at least one measure,² and where our racist inclinations expand out into systemic structures that exclude and deny, actively discriminate against others, solely on the basis of color of skin or ethnic origin, or just because folks are different. This situation, the state of

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/14/richest-1-percent-now-own-half-the-worlds-wealth.html>

the world, is certainly not God's doing, God, who provides for his people miraculously and graciously, even in the desert, as we read in the Exodus passage.

Still, I don't know about you, but I find myself inclined to agree with the earlier workers who cry foul in the story, when they see they receive the same amount as the others who were there so short a time. "That's not fair!" Remember what I said earlier about the Bible's way of drawing us into the story? Many times it's not in the way we would expect, but herein the Bible's power and wisdom. Stay with me. The landowner here knows that anything less than the full daily wage for the later-arriving workers would mean that their families would go hungry that night. This is a generous and gracious response, it is a response of compassion for those later arrivals who had been seeking work as well. When God is all you depend on for your sufficiency, you find that you are not looking to your neighbors and measuring yourself against them. The externalities of this world are not what ultimately feed our spirits, and herein lies the deception of wealth and worldly riches, which sets up false categories in human societies and presumes to divide and exclude folks based on their accumulated riches and privilege, standards which only deny and do harm to the image of God in our neighbor. We are all beggars before God.

The final lesson from this parable to explore today, and there are many more, to be sure, is that God's grace is enough. This is spiritual food. When we have partaken of God's manna, God's daily provision of grace, when we have put in a day's work and received enough for that day and no more, trusting that God will provide for tomorrow as well, we are no longer hungry, grasping, questing for that which ultimately will never satisfy, seeking comfort and definition through the externalities of life, through the endless measuring up of ourselves against our neighbors.

So why don't you partake of God's blessing today? Will you enter into the Bible's story, and let God write his story onto your own? How can we as a

church write the grace of God in one another's lives, and more integrally celebrate this call to work in the harvest fields? One day at a time. Rise up early to meet the Lord, let transforming words of hope and promise, eternal life frame your day's activities, and remember that your neighbors, your co-workers, the ones arriving early and those who show up late - all of them are fellow beggars before God, and you truly do not know anyone's story as God does, or what were the complicating factors that brought them to the vineyard at that later hour. Be compassionate as God is compassionate, and let the unlimited riches of Jesus' perfect love be the measure for how you respond to your sisters and brothers along this path. You are loved. Perfectly, fully, and truly. Amen.