

Text: Matthew 20:1-16 NRSV

Message: Who should be the first or the last?

Pastor Riva

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer and my refuge. Amen.

If we are to interpret the Scripture literally, today's passage is the complete opposite of a God that is fair. In the human standard, people should be paid depending on the work that he/she has done or capable of doing. Whether a worker earns hourly wages or considered salaried, a person's compensation depends on how many hours of work is done for hourly workers, or how a worker is qualified for the position for the salaried folks. My point is this, in human standards, this parable is the opposite of good labor practices. This is simply because we define God in our own understanding. But because we are not interpreting the Scripture literally, we will not define God in our own comprehension, we will be looking at this passage in a different lens, almost antithetical with how we would normally make sense of this passage – although to be honest, it does not.

One among the many realities of our society that is put to light in this passage how binaries have become important. In today's passage, we see the binary of the workers who started early and those who came in late. Allow me to put this in our context. We can say that the workers who started early in the morning are those who have been born and raised in the church, like myself. It could be the United Methodist Church or any other church. Then, I will compare those who recently found a religious or faith tradition. Interestingly, I can see the parallels of people who grew up inside the church and how we sometimes feel entitled to the church that we were in for the majority of our lives. As I have mentioned earlier, I grew up United Methodist as a PK, and even though I attended a couple of megachurches for a short time, I still find myself inside the sanctuary of a United Methodist Church. Growing up in the Methodist tradition is heavily weaved into my church tradition. I remember as a young person, I would always question a person's 'tenure' in the Methodist tradition when a new element of worship/ministry is introduced. This is simply because I feel that because I am more invested in the ministries of the United Methodist Church, I should be in more leadership capacities than those who just become members of the denomination. This is not unusual. Tradition is very much entrenched in the Methodist faith, so we, cradle Methodists have the tendency to feel ownership. And I am saying the word 'we' because I am also guilty of this.

In a broader conversation, this tendency is also prevalent in Christianity – especially in conservative and fundamental beliefs. To describe this in simple terms, this the type of Christianity that is more focused on a person's relationship with God and with Jesus Christ, or as how we call this in the Methodist orgababble – personal holiness. I want to clarify that I am not saying that this is an incorrect way of thinking. What I am suggesting is that fundamental and conservative beliefs are more focused in the holiness through a person's own religious practices – praying, reading and quoting the Bible, or even 'saving' others. I grew up in the modified version of this tradition. Back in my undergrad days, I was a member of an evangelical megachurch, part of a cell group with a leader, and the leader guides us with the things that we should do, because she has been part of the that church longer than I have been. It was understood that she knows better than I do. And she is the model of faith for us who are members of the cell group. She has certain privileges as the leader of the cell group. Looking back there was nothing wrong with this set up. Since she has been in God's vineyard longer than the rest of us, she has an edge than the rest of us in that small group.

This passage reminds me of that organization. Like the vineyard workers who were hired to work early in the day, our group leader tends to oversee what we, members do. As we look at the passage, I imagine that because the last ones to be hired were paid first, those who started earlier – or more tenured, looked at the wages of those who were hired in the afternoon. In my younger years, this is also me looking at those who were newer in the Methodist faith and assess their credentials. Unfortunately, like the more tenured vineyard workers, I also expect that I get more recognition than the newer folks, because like the tenured workers, I know that I have more experience. I should know better, therefore I should be rewarded and recognized more. But I am forgetting is that God's grace is offered to every being, without God asking of how long I have been a Methodist and a Christian. John Wesley calls this the prevenient grace. We are all entitled to it – even before we ever did anything for God's kingdom. It was there for us. I think that was the point that I was missing back then. Either I have forgotten about it or refused to accept the fact that we all hold the right to God's grace. We were gifted that grace long before we even asked for it. Hopefully as I gain more years, I have also gained more wisdom that God's grace is really offered to everyone, whether it is deserved or not. That's what a free gift means. It is given without conditions, which I think is what the passage was talking about. God's grace as represented by the wages of the vineyard workers, is the same for everyone, whether you have been a Christian/Methodist all your life, or not. To be honest, I believe that God's grace is actually given to everyone, whether you are a Christian or not. John Wesley pushes the limitation further to saying that God's grace is given to everything – yes, even non-humans. God's grace is given to all of God's creation, no requirements needed. And we cannot translate this in our understanding because God's wisdom is beyond how we understand God is.

This perspective leads me to a reflection of, if we all have equal access to God's grace, why then do we think that we are better than others? If we are all recipients of God's grace, we are not supposed to consume the natural resources that God gifted us irresponsibly, because we are equal with God's creation. If we are all entitled to God's grace equally, then we should not think that we are better than others because we finished better education, our skin is lighter, our bank account has more money, we are older or more seasoned, we have legal documentations to stay in a foreign country, or we have more power in different aspects of life. Additionally, when I go back to the lesson that God's grace is offered to everyone equally, I have always wondered why we are focused on converting others to become Christians, or even to become members of our church. Like many of the lessons that I reflect on and share, this is again controversial. Membership is important in any organization like churches, but if we are to really think about the concept of God's grace for everyone, should we really focus on recruiting members to be part of our church? Shouldn't we rather focus on making disciples – whether they become members of our church or not, these disciples can make disciples – it becomes a ripple effect. Don't you think we can transform our broken world this way?

As I contemplate on this passage, it also brings me to one word – humility. We are all given God's grace as gift, it was given to us without any condition, and knowing that this gift is not just given to me, it brings me to a place of humility, being equal with others. I believe that as we have more privileges in life, it should motivate us to be much humbler so that we can be more accessible to those who have less than what we have. I saw a quote the other day, 'When you have more than you need build a bigger table – not a higher fence'. I believe that we are called to humility because we all have the same footing in God's grace. Whether we see ourselves as the first vineyard workers to be hired or the last, we are all qualified to receive the wages that God offers. We are all entitled to God's grace, no matter what. May it be so. Amen.