



ST. LUKE'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

## Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 2020

### Where is the Love?

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Glenda Empsall

[Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16](#)

May the words that we share be like the rain that falls from heaven, and does not return heavenward without first accomplishing its purpose; to refresh and bring new life. Amen.

The lectionary for today reveals many facets of human nature. The Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron that they would rather have died enslaved in Egypt with full stomachs than to be free and starve to death in the wilderness. God provided quail and manna from heaven, but they soon grumbled about the tasteless manna! Paul, writing from prison and facing death, was so committed to his work of proclaiming the good news, that even though "to depart and be with Christ" was "far better," he would "remain in the flesh," encouraging the Philippians to persist in their faith in spite of opposition and suffering. Paul set the good example for us to trust in God and proclaim the Gospel no matter what!

How are we to proclaim this week's Gospel reading? Some of my sources called it the parable of the 'generous' or the 'eccentric' landowner. One referred to the landowner as a 'union buster.' Another called him a 'foolish businessman.' You decide. "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." The obligations of an employer are outlined in Deuteronomy [24:13-16] NET. "You must not oppress a lowly and poor servant, whether one from among your fellow Israelites or from the resident foreigners who are living in your land and villages. You must pay his wage that very day before the sun sets, for he is poor and his life depends on it. Otherwise he will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin." One denarius was the wage for a 12-hour day; 6 am to 6 pm. It was enough to 'get by' but not enough to get ahead.

When we lived in Conroe, TX there was a place downtown where day laborers gathered. Contractors in need of extra help that day drove up in their pickup and held their hand out the window indicating the number of workers they needed. There was no 'choosing' by the driver, but I expect that there was a hierarchy among the workers that determined who would be next to climb into the back of a truck. There was no bargaining for a guaranteed wage. Workers took their chances in an underground economy, but in that close-knit community, poor-pay or no-pay employers would have been quickly identified. Was there an honor code, or did the 'new guy' find out the hard way? I wonder if potential employers also came to know who would work a full day, who would complain about working conditions; or spend too much time at the water cooler or leaning on their shovel.

At the end of Matthew chapter 19, Jesus says to the disciples, "...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." In this parable, we hear a similar phrase, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The landowner made quite a production of settling accounts with the vineyard workers. I wonder why he used last-in-first-out accounting instead of first-in-first-out? Wouldn't the exhausted 12-hour workers be anxious to collect their denarius and go home? The landowner put his 'generosity' on display for all

to see, thereby causing resentment among some workers. How would you feel? Those who worked 1 hour and were paid for 12 must have been elated! And, having seen the last-hired get a full day's wage, "...when the first came, they thought they would receive more." But, those who worked 12 hours and had, "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" were paid the same as those 'slackers' who were "standing idle all day." No wonder there was grumbling! The workers hired at 6 am knew they would get one denarius for the day's work and that is what they were paid. What the landowner said was true; the first-hired had agreed to their pay. And whether a worker was in the vineyard for 12 hours or 1 hour, everyone received the same (equal) pay. But was that fair?

According to Google dictionary, "Equal" means: being the same in quantity, size, degree, or value; a person or thing considered to be the same as another in status or quality; to be the same in number or amount. "Equal" is quantitative – something that can be measured. In the parable, the landowner treated each worker equally. "Fair" means: in accordance with the rules or standards; legitimate; without cheating or trying to achieve unjust advantage. "Fair" depends on context. It compares the standard to a specific situation. Those who worked in the vineyard for a day and received a daily wage were treated fairly according to the standard. But if everyone gets the same, where is the incentive, beyond your own work ethic, to exert more effort? Maybe we want fair and equal, when it serves our interests, but not if it means that those freeloaders get the same treatment that we do.

The landowner said to the disgruntled worker, "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?" There are two other times in Matthew when someone is called 'friend.' At a wedding banquet, the king said to a guest, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." [22:11-13]; and when Judas came to betray Jesus, Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." [26:50]. How the landowner said "friend" makes a difference in this story. I would like to think that the landowner said "friend" in a way intended to de-escalate the looming conflict. But if that had been the case, I think he would have stopped after, "Take what belongs to you."

Instead, the landowner continued to emphasize his own authority and status; what he chose to do; what belonged to him. Then he asked if the worker was 'envious;' literally, 'has an evil eye.' Suddenly, the day laborer was the bad guy for feeling he had been treated unfairly. By his actions and words, the landowner punctuated the disparity of wealth and power between the laborers and himself; and publicly humiliated one of them. The landowner was first in money and position; last in understanding. I believe it is when we become **last** in: arrogance, boasting, envy, resentment rudeness, and wrongdoing; and **first** in: commitment, compassion, empathy, faithfulness, hope, kindness, patience, and truthfulness that LOVE will reign, first and only, and the kingdom of heaven will be manifest.

Everyday there are laborers working or hoping to be hired and paid a fair wage in order to buy their daily bread; 'essential' workers. Let us truly fulfill our baptismal covenant, recognizing and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourself; striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being. In the Way of Love; Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest.