# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“The Workers in the Vineyard”**

**Matthew 20:1-15**

**October 16, 2022**

Continuing our series in the parables this morning, Jesus tells yet another parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, using it to teach us how to be on God’s team in this world, how to be a faithful disciple of Christ. This morning’s parable is about the generosity of God, and as we hear about God’s generosity, we are reminded that we are called to a similar generosity toward him and toward one another.

When I was a boy I lived in Copenhagen, Denmark. On Saturday I would get my allowance, and I would spend some of it on ice cream at Mama and Papa Nielson’s grocery store. My friends and I would wait outside the store, looking in the big window, waiting for Mama Nielsen to take charge of the ice cream counter. You see, Papa Nielsen always gave one scoop of ice cream – no more and no less – because that is what was paid for. But not Mama Nielson. She would put a scoop in the cup, look at it, look at us, and then add a little more, and then a little more, until the cup was full to overflowing with ice cream. While Papa was always fair, Mama Nielsen was always generous. Given the choice I preferred the generosity of love rather than the fairness of an economic principle. I invite you to turn with me to Jesus’ parable in Matthew 20:1-15

“For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work. At nine o’clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o’clock he did the same thing. At five o’clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, ‘Why haven’t you been working today?’ They replied, ‘Because no one hired us.’ The landowner told them, ‘Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.’ That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. When those hired at five o’clock were paid, each received a full day’s wage. When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day’s wage. When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, ‘Those people worked only one hour, and yet you’ve paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.’ He answered one of them, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair! Didn’t you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?’”

As he does in all his parables, Jesus uses common, everyday occurrences to reveal spiritual truth. For a landowner at harvest time to go into the local village and hire day-laborers to work in his vineyard was normal practice. Early, at about 6am, he hired some workers and told them he would pay them the normal daily wage, which was the amount of money a man would need to care for himself and his family for a day. Evidently, he needed more workers, so he went out at 9am, at noon, at 3pm and at 5pm, each time hiring workers, and each time telling them he would pay them whatever was right. So far, so good. But, here comes the twist.

It’s the end of the day and it’s time to pay the workers, and the first to be paid are those who only worked one hour. Surprisingly, they each receive a full day’s wage. Those who have worked the full 12-hour day notice this, and while waiting for their pay must have said to one another, “Look at that. Those Johnny-come-latelies were given a full day’s wage. Surely, we who have worked all day will get much more than them.” But, when it was their turn, they received the same as the one-hour laborers. Here they have a choice. They can either look at the situation with eyes of grace and be happy for the one-hour workers and the generosity of the landowner, or they can look at the situation through the lenses of fairness and claim to have been treated wrongly. They choose fairness.

And, we can see their point, can’t we. If God is going to bless someone who has worked much less in his kingdom than I have, doesn’t fairness dictate that I should receive more from God than them? We may even, like the workers, grumble at God. One of the features of his parables is that Jesus gets us to start relating to the wrong people. Like the parable of the Prodigal Son that we looked at several weeks ago. Who among us didn’t feel, at least just a little, that the older brother was not treated as well as he deserved? It’s not fair, we say. The kingdom of God is not about fairness, says Jesus. It’s not about comparing ourselves with one another and then judging how much we deserve, or how little they deserve, from God. It’s about grace and placing our trust in a generous God who delights in being kind to us, and to them.

In his vineyard, as we are doing the work to which he has called us, he asks us to treat one another as he has treated us: with grace, delighting in sharing generously with others what God has so generously given us. To do with our money what the landowner does with his: care for the needs of others. In this way we are becoming like Christ, and we are taking on the character of our Father in heaven.