

Here is the crazy story that Jesus told: A man owned a vineyard and needed to get the grapes harvested before the rains came. He hired some men at the early morning hour and agreed to pay them a silver coin for the day's work. At nine and noon, and then at five p.m., he hired more men to help with the harvest. When evening came, the owner called all the workers together. They were all paid the same amount. Those who worked ten hours were paid the same amount as those who worked one hour. Those who had worked all day began to complain. The owner told them they had no reason to complain --he paid them what they had agreed upon when they started. He then said, "Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15).

The story sounds as if it were a dreamed up tale; however, this sort of thing was real in Palestine. There, the grape harvest comes on in September very quickly, and must be harvested before the rain comes. It's a race against time to make it. Anybody who can work, does, even if he can work only an hour or two. The pay for a day's work was the average for that time. The men standing in the town square waiting for work was a similar scene to our union halls of today - very common in that part of the world. They would stand there with their equipment all day waiting for a job. The fact that some of them stood till five o'clock shows that they really wanted to work.

These people always lived on the poverty line. Whether they got a job or not determined if they and their families ate that day. To have no one hire them was a disaster. So this was a common sight and situation in Palestine, that all who heard Jesus would understand. It could be seen in any small town where the grape harvest was being rushed before the rains came.

There are some truths here that go right to the center of our Christian belief. When Jesus first told the story, it had a special significance to those who heard it. There is a warning here to the disciples who heard it. Jesus was telling them that they were very fortunate to be in on the beginning of the Christian movement. He warned them that there would be others who would join much later. He was warning them that they must be careful about thinking they are better than those who join later than they did. Jesus was saying that all people, no matter when they come to Christ and his church, are precious in his sight. It is easy for us who have been in the church a long time, investing so much of ourselves in it, to feel we are above or better or more important to God than those who have joined recently.

Often when the young and "new blood" in the congregation want to change things, or begin to operate with different methods and procedures, we can come to resent it. We feel as though we have so much more invested in the congregation that things just ought to be done the way we are used to doing them. This story tells us that seniority does not so much mean honor as it does responsibility in the family of God.

Jesus was also speaking to the Jews. There is a strong warning here against exclusiveness. No doubt these Jews saw themselves as the chosen people, God's special folks - thus they looked down on the Gentile people. Jesus must have told this story to warn them that the Gentiles were also God's people. Even, though they come late, they still are rewarded the same gift. Someone has said, "**In God's economy, there is no such thing as a most favored nation clause.**"

One race, or one denomination, or one nationality is not more important to God than another. There is no single franchise on God's grace. These two things Jesus must have wanted to say to the Jews and the disciples in his day when he told the story. But, when we study the Scripture, we must do more than discover its setting and its rationale back then; we must also ask ourselves, "What does this parable say to us now?" Here we learn a lot about our God, and it's all very reassuring.

The story tells us that God is kind. To be unemployed is a devastating thing. It robs us of our sense of self-worth. It removes from us our pride and feelings of accomplishment. It degrades and embarrasses us. It is a tragic thing when our talents, our capability to do things is wasted and idle. So here stood these men: sad, depressed, angry, and hurt. The owner of the vineyard took pity on them - he couldn't bear to see them idle - to think of them returning home with a tale of no employment and no income. So he hired them just for a brief time, and gave them the whole day's wages. He knew they couldn't return home with less, and still hold up their heads.

Henry Drummond used to say, looking back over a more than ordinarily distinguished life, that the things that stood out in this retrospect as an abiding worth and value were the four or five times he had reflected to others the kindness of God.

There is real kindness and compassion and tenderness in this picture of the owner of the vineyard.

Armin C. Oldsen writes: "Some years ago a well-meaning individual hit upon what he felt would be a sure-fire solution to the problems of the world. He would gather all the people in the world in a giant amphitheater and would read to them the story of the Good Samaritan, and tell them to '... go and do likewise,' that is to be kind to one another. I doubt it would do much good. I fervently wish, instead, it were possible to

gather all the people of the world together in one place around the cross of Christ on Calvary. I would devoutly pray that while they were there, they might all be unforgettably impressed with the horror of the sin of humanity and with the boundless love of God in Christ."

William Barclay feels, "This parable states implicitly two great truths - the right of every man to work, and the right of every man to a living wage for his work."

I think it's a lot more profound than that - it pictures our God as concerned, caring about our welfare. When we are embarrassed, unable to support ourselves, feeling frustrated because of helplessness in our situation, God hurts for us and wants to help.

There is a basic kindness here that is beautiful.

There is also encouragement in this story. God comforts us. He reassures us that those who came into his kingdom at the very last moment still are dear and precious to him. Don't worry about the latecomer to the faith. God still loves and cares for him. Be encouraged - our God doesn't check your years of service - we have the great reward for them here.

When a missionary had told a Chinese mother about the love of God, the mother exclaimed: "I've always thought there should be a God like that." It's encouraging, isn't it? He loves us - those who are baptized as infants, those who are confirmed, those who come to him at marriage, those who are baptized as adults, those who seek him out in tragedy, and those who at the last moment of their lives, finally give in to God.

*"God paints the lily of the field,
Perfumes each lily bell:
If God so loves the little flowers,
I know God loves me well."*

Poem by Maria Straus

Then, too, people die at all ages - old and faithful for years and young and just beginning. From God comes the same open arms and welcome for both because of Jesus Christ. Neither died too early or too late. Wonderful how generous God is. They who worked only part of the day got a real gift. It's true of God: the length and kinds of ways we serve him all rank the same - the preacher, the usher, the choir member, the calling member, the janitor, the one who witnesses on his job. Notice, too, you and I don't even earn a reward from God. He gives us an undeserved gift. What God gives is not salary, then, but a generous gift, not a reward, but his wonderful grace.

"Why did the earlier workers not rejoice that the man who had waited long in the marketplace was now at peace, with money to take home to his family? Why did not the older brother rejoice that the prodigal was now restored, set free from the rags and hunger of the far country? If only we had but a tincture of God's love would we not be glad, as heaven is glad, that the lost sheep is safe in the fold, delivered from briars and wolves? Or are you jealous because I am generous? God asks." It's tough to give up our idea of earning what God gives us! The lovelessness of these all day workers is set to contrast the generosity of God. The rewards of God just do not mesh with our human standards and way of thinking. But these men who worked all day were not cheated - instead, those who only worked for a short time received a gift.

There is something important here. The big difference in the workers is the spirit in which they do their work. Looking at it reasonably, those who worked all day had a legitimate gripe. The logical way of looking at it would say that they would be paid more than those who worked only a few hours. The difference was that the first who came, the Scripture says, had an agreement. The last ones merely worked because they were delighted to have a job and a chance to earn something. They were willing to leave the remuneration up to the master.

The big difference here is motivation. If we go about our work asking "What will I get out of it?" that's one reason to work. Another, is to do the work of the kingdom for the joy of working and the joy of serving our God and God's people.

Archbishop Nathan Soderblom used to say, "Doctrine divides, but service unites."

The friends of Louis Pasteur reported the scientist as often saying, "In what way can I be of service to humanity? My time and energy belong to mankind."

Jesus ended his parable with these familiar words, "So those who are last shall be first, and those who are first will be last" (Matthew 20). The person who goes about serving with no regard for the reward, but working for the joy of it, will know the joy of the Christian life - to aim at regard is to fail to achieve it, and to forget reward is to find it.

Let us remember that the difference here is in the motivation to serve. Let us recall always that God is generous, and that God has encouragement for us. The story tells us that God is kind. We have a warning - to beware of being exclusive like the Jews, and beware of thinking that we who are a long time in the church, are more privileged than others. "Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?" And Jesus concluded, "So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last" (Matthew 20:15-16). Amen

