

Sermon: They Grumbled

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16**

For context, today's Gospel reading follows the story of the man who asked Jesus what good deeds he needed to do to gain eternal life. Jesus said, keep the commandments. The man asked, which ones? Jesus told him and then the man said, I do all those things now; what do I still lack? Jesus said, sell all your stuff and give the money you get to the poor; that will get you treasure in heaven; *then* come, follow me. And the man went away grieving because it's hard to give up all your stuff (19:16-22).

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a *rich* person to enter the kingdom of heaven" (19:23). Then they get into a discussion about who can be saved and so on, and finally Peter said, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" And Jesus tells them they have a place in heaven already, and that everyone who drops everything to follow him will also inherit eternal life.

Jesus wraps it up by saying, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (19:30). And then he launches into today's parable in which he explains exactly how the last will be first, and the first will be last.

When we hear the parable, we get the sense that time is of the essence; Matthew takes care to tell us that the landowner goes out early in the morning, then again at about 9:00, then noon, 3:00, and 5:00. By sending idle workers into the vineyard to work at 5:00, we can guess that it's summer and there's plenty of daylight left. But when evening came, it was time to pay everyone, because the poor must be paid on the working day before sunset.

The group hired first knows what they agreed to do and for how much. The 'usual daily wage' was one denarius, about enough to feed a large family for one day. Each subsequent group was told they would be paid 'whatever is right,' which seems fair since they weren't working a full day. So, when the landowner paid everyone the same wage, the workers hired first *grumbled* at his generosity, forgetting the deal they made.

So, this becomes a parable about justice and what is fair. It is about a social situation where idle workers can't find work and a day's wage. And it is about the responsibility of those who have to help those who have not.

These days, our business mantra is 'Effort = Results.' If you are employed, your employer asks you to do the work you agreed to do for the agreed wage. If you are unemployed, you are expected to get out there and find work. And if you're retired, hopefully, you can just sit back and laugh, but even then, for some, having an income is often more than a bonus.

So, in this economy, how stressful must it be, knowing that today, you might not be able to feed your family? Never mind the added stress of meeting your rent payment. The drastic shrinking of the economy in this pandemic time has put such a real possibility at the forefront of all our thinking, and yes, it is stressful. The uncertainty is making people around the world very anxious.

Back in the wilderness, 'The whole congregation of the Israelites *murmured* against Moses and Aaron' (Exodus 16:2), as the KJV put it.

Just last week, 'Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. *So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses*' (14:31). Then they sang their victory songs.

Now, it's only been about a month and a half since they left Egypt, and already, we have a case of 'What have you done for us lately, LORD?'

What the Israelites fondly remember is that in Egypt, they had their fill of bread. But maybe they have forgotten that they were also captives there. They also seem to have forgotten that it was God who engineered their very recent escape from Pharaoh. But that's what happens when you find yourself in the wilderness without a ready supply of food: you get anxious and you start looking for someone to blame. Look out, Moses.

So, once again, God intervenes. Do we see a pattern emerging that when the people are in great need and their leaders are unable to give direct help, God steps in? In time, the people will come realize that they can trust and rely on God for help.

Anyway, God provides meat in the form of quail in the evening and bread in the morning. The bread, though, is unlike anything they have ever seen before. It's a flaky,

sticky substance that is actually pretty good to eat but it doesn't keep. Quite rightly, the people ask each other, 'what is it?' The Hebrew word for 'what is it?' is *manna*.

This is no miracle; this is a real thing exuded by a desert shrub in May and June. There is a historical foundation to everything that happens in Exodus and it's all woven into the story as it developed over time.

In this reading, we also hear a hint of the Sabbath. God said that on the sixth day, they should gather twice as much manna because there would be none to gather on the seventh day.

And in the last verse, Moses says, 'what is it' is the bread that the Lord has given them to eat. Matthew gives us an echo of this story in the Lord's Prayer when we petition God to 'give us this day our daily bread.' We're really praying for God to provide for our needs when we really need it – which is every day. And if we think of the growth cycle of a wheat plant, we can see that all bread is bread from heaven.

In Exodus, manna is rationed; it will not keep overnight; and it is meant to test the people's faith and commitment to God. It turns out that we're always being tested. It's all about trusting in God. And in both readings, everyone ends up getting enough to eat.

In the Gospels, status reversal characterizes the kingdom of heaven, but it's more than that. Last and First don't just switch places. The last will be first, and the first will be last but what about those in the middle? What about them? Do they remain stuck there, or what?

My feeling is that, in this parable, the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who treats everyone the same. There is no 'first' and there is no 'last' – there's just people and to God, we're all the same. Landowner and worker need each other.

A theologian named Nathan Eubank wrote that, '[The] generous wage received by the workers who came late in the day is a lovely expression of Matthew's repeated claim that God will repay workers far more than they deserve.'¹

What we all deserve and should expect is equal opportunity in work, education, housing. Does it matter to us how much that other guy gets paid, as long as we get paid the agreed wage for the work we do? That's between you and your employer.

But when you're doing God's work, the work is simply to be done without any regard for wages.² We'll get paid in other ways, as Jesus explained to the man who

wanted to gain eternal life. Through this parable, we learn what it means to act as God acts, to be generous to all. When it comes to justice, Effort really does equal Results.

Amen.

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¹ Eubank, Nathan. 2013. "What Does Matthew Say about Divine Recompense?: On the Misuse of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (20.1-16)." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 (3): 259.

² Ibid., 244.