

United Vineyard of the Valley

I once saw a bumper sticker that read “Those who seek God in the eleventh hour often die at 10:30.” While clever, I don’t think this is the point of the parable told earlier today in the children’s conversation. Some people see a straightforward parable here – the vineyard is God’s kingdom, the workers are believers and the day’s wage is salvation. All those in the vineyard by “closing time” – so to speak – get into heaven and it didn’t matter when in life you came to Jesus, or how many hours you logged in the field, you’re saved. And while it is true that it is never too late for redemption, such a straightforward reading leaves something wanting. It shirks the challenge of this text – Jesus is telling us that in God’s Kingdom there is no reward for hard work. Those who bore the burden of the sun all day and toiled for their pay were treated the same as those who lounged in the market all day chatting. Those who put in the least effort received the most generosity. As the parable ends – “the last will be first and the first will be last.” Ok – so we know the good news for the eleventh hour Christian. But what about the first and third and even ninth hour Christians? Why should they toil in a field all day if they could show up and the end of the day for the same pay?

This story wouldn’t work if the land owner told the workers up front that they were all going to get paid the same at the end of the day. So even though the parable is dependent on the ignorance of the workers about their compensation, Jesus lets us in on the secret. He tells us up front that the Kingdom of Heaven is like this – those who

show up last are treated the same as those who show up first. Jesus isn't helping us try to game the system and take advantage of God's generosity. So why are we being told this? And why are we being told in story form?

In order to understand this parable, I think it is best to examine parables in general first, and then we can look specifically at this one. As many of you know, I recently graduated from Harvard Divinity School and while there I had access to some of the top professors in their fields. And if I went around campus and asked them why Jesus taught in parables, I can imagine what I'd hear. I'd go to a historical-critical scholar and get a long answer that boils down to the illiteracy of Jesus' followers and the oral tradition in first century Judea. Parables were a mnemonic device to ensure accurate transmission and were a form of teaching and entertainment as familiar to them as television is to us.

Another professor who takes a special interest in the political dynamics of first century religious movements might point out that Jesus' enemies were seeking to twist his words and use them against him, having him arrested or killed for heresy. The interpretive layer of a parable would give Jesus political cover against those seeking to destroy him.

And if I were to drop into my favorite professor's office, who specializes in creative writing and ministry, she'd tell me that parables have a capacity to tell truths that cannot be distilled into a memorable saying like "the last will be first" or "love thy neighbor." Some

religious truths and ideas cannot be expressed in simple language or placed on a bumper sticker. You need to paint a picture with a story to capture it all, and to put the process of making meaning into the hands of the listener rather than handing down statements.

All these are great answers and I'm grateful for the instruction of such wise teachers. But fortunately, though, somebody thought to ask a teacher with a little more authority on the matter: Jesus. In Matthew Chapter 13, after the parable of the Sower, the disciples approach Jesus and ask: "why do you teach in parables?"

Jesus answer differs from all of my professors. He says, "the reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" Jesus is once again quoting Isaiah, as he did in last week's scripture, and at first glance it seems like Jesus is trying to confuse us. But Jesus and Isaiah both warn us about how the people harden their hearts, ears, and eyes against God and instead of actively seeking God do their best to ignore God's voice. Jesus tells his disciples moments later, "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." By telling parables Jesus blesses our eyes and ears and awakens our faculties and senses to God – by putting the effort of interpretation in our hands we become not blind followers of a controlling religious leader but clear-eyed thinkers seeking the ways that God is revealed in the world.

In that spirit, I'm not going to pretend that I can give you the answer to how this parable should be interpreted. Each of these parables speaks to our individual ears and hearts, and it is up to each of

us to make meaning of them. Mindful that I am not giving “the” interpretation of this parable, but rather my interpretation, allow me to share with you how this parable speaks to my own senses.

Perhaps it’s a lack of humility and a misguided sense of entitlement, but in parables like this one I tend to identify with the people getting a raw deal. I was born into a Christian family and baptized for the first time when I was 13. Now I haven’t been a perfect Christian so far, and I surely will remain imperfect in the future, but it’s my great hope that one day in the distant future I can look back on my life and see a day of toiling in God’s vineyard. I feel like this parable is telling me, “Guess what? That doesn’t make you special. Don’t expect a bonus.”

Honestly, that’s something I personally need to hear. Self-righteousness is not something unheard of in the clergy. But I push against it, too. What about fairness? What about Justice? Why should good people who do good works their entire life be given the same wage as some sleepy-eyed 11th hour Christian who showed up at the last hour? Why are criminals who repent on their deathbeds paid the same wage as the Apostles? Doesn’t a concept like Karma jive more with our sense of fairness? What goes around comes around? Everybody gets their due – hour by hour, deed by deed. Aren’t these the cultural values we’re raised with here in America: Work hard, pay your dues, and you’ll be rewarded in the end?

But Jesus constantly challenges our work obsessed and goal-oriented culture, whether it’s the first century or the twenty-first,

tearing down the hierarchies and senses of entitlement. The last shall be first, first shall be last. The kingdom of heaven isn't a meritocracy, it isn't about who is the "better" Christian or the "harder worker." Those distinctions become meaningless on the other side. Indeed, even the idea that the first shall be last and the last first breaks down because in the parable, everybody is given equal pay. There *is* no first or last. Everybody gets an even share.

In fact, the complaint of the first hour workers is not that they were paid an unfair wage or given any less than they agreed upon, but rather the landowner had "made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day." Made *them* equal to *us*.

The land owner's response speaks well to this response of entitlement, of the desire to be elevated – so what if I'm generous? What's it to you? The New Revised Standard Version of the parable reads, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" A more literal translation of the final phrase reads, "or is your eye wicked because I am good?"

When we look to the good fortunes of others – the times when they receive grace or happiness or even rewards that they seem not to deserve – with resentment our eyes become wicked and corrupted. We end up like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son – off pouting instead of celebrating with his father that his brother is no longer lost. He has a brother again, who is alive, and finally home. Why not see this with eyes of compassion and gratitude instead of eyes of resentment and entitlement?

Look! Look at the love God has for our neighbors! For those unable to find work early in the day and those who would go home poor without a full day's wage. And is it not great that God continually calls people into the vineyard and all are given what they need? Not what they earned, but what they need. Truly, God is great. When you let go of meritocracy, when you let go of competition, when you let go your desire to receive *more*, then you can see the beauty of equality, the wonders of compassion.

But there is a lingering problem – why work then? I know it's blasphemy to criticize God, but if God operated a vineyard like that here in Temecula it would be a colossal failure. Do you think those 1st hour workers are going to show up at the crack of dawn tomorrow when they can show up at the end of the day and collect a paycheck? Our God is an awesome God, but a terrible businessman. If this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, I doubt it's a profitable enterprise.

Thankfully the Kingdom of Heaven transcends the kingdoms of the world, and operates differently. But it's a fair question – if this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like why show up early? What's the rush? God's coming back at hour 3 and hour 6 and hour 9 and even in the eleventh hour. Every hour of our lives God calls us into his Kingdom. We'll never be turned away. The door is open. Why not live a life however *we* want, and then report for duty around sunset?

Is our only reason to work fear of dying young? Is it like the bumper sticker theologian says? Those who seek God at the eleventh hour die at 10:30? Should we hedge our bets and show up early?

Should we baptize our children straight out of the womb because it's a crazy world out there and anything can happen? Is a life of faith and devotion just an insurance policy?

So long as salvation is the only thing important to you – so long as you are only concerned with the payment you'll receive at the end of the day – this parable will never make sense. And unless you are willing to abandon self-interest and reward and rejoice in the goodness of God and the good news of his grace to all people, there *is* no reason to go to work. Go ahead and stay out until the eleventh hour.

Because Kingdom work is not work for the selfish or the greedy. Kingdom work is not about what's in it for you – you don't work in the hot sun for a denarius, you do it because you love God and love God's people. We are called to do God's will here on earth as it is in heaven because we want there to be a vineyard, here, on earth, for all nations and generations.

I love this church. And the reason I love this church, the reason why I'm called to serve this church, and the reason why I'm here talking to you today is because this is a church with a vision and with big dreams. And this is a church that has the potential to be a true vineyard here in wine country, and I want to be a part of that. I have a lot of admiration for my predecessor Randy Leisley, and for the many of you here today who have been longtime members. And I also know how much hard work has gone into making this place the beautiful spiritual home that it is. Many of you here have labored long and hard in a hot sun to get us to this point. So this may be a challenging text for

you, to be told that that when the foreman in the sky hands down divine wages there's no special reward waiting for you. But this text is also a reminder of why it is that we are doing this. We aren't struggling to establish a progressive church here in Murrieta because we want to win some kind of culture war. We aren't trying to grow this church because we want to brag about our numbers. We aren't carrying out local and international ministries because it will earn us a special place in heaven. And, Lord knows we aren't in this to make money – if this is a business model, it's about as profitable as God's vineyard would be in Temecula.

But that's a good sign to me. Because I believe that both the church universal and the individual church is called to be a vineyard, and we are its workers. Ideally, church work should be like working in the vineyard. And working in the vineyard is not about the paycheck of salvation or divine reward. There are people who think Christians do good deeds because they fear hell or the wrath of a bearded man in the sky. And some Christians do go to church in the 3rd hour of their lives because they're worried they'll die at 10:30. But the point of all parables is to awaken our senses to God, and this parable in particular is telling us not to view the world through a wicked eye of jealousy, a wicked eye of self-interest, a wicked eye of entitlement. It is telling us to see with eyes of compassion! It is telling us to rejoice in God's goodness and generosity. So the work we do together to build this church up – the money we put into the collection plate, the hours we volunteer and even the voice we use to sing our hymns – is not about

saving ourselves but working for others. It's not about being an investment in ourselves but an asset to our community.

So if somebody asks you what our church is for, let them know it tries to be a vineyard for all of God's people. Tell them it's a sanctuary in a world of chaos and anxiety; tell them it's a witness for peace and justice in a world of violence and inequality; tell them it's a place of welcome and inclusion in a world of competition and exclusivity; tell them it's a place of calling and purpose in a world of aimlessness and confusion; tell them it's a place of love for neighbor in a world of self-interest.

Tell them it's for them.

And if they choose to enter the vineyard, which they can do at anytime, their salvation won't be the denarius they receive at the end of the day. It will be in the transformation that takes place when you work for God – it is no longer about yourself but others. Eyes closed in selfishness are opened and awakened to compassion.

Alleluia and AMEN.