

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
REV. JOHN BURTON
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SERMON: A WHOLE BUNCH OF DISGRUNTLED WORKERS
DEMANDING EQUALITY

TEXT: MATTHEW 20: 1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.” When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “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?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’

Gosh, at last! Finally, an easy scripture! Thank you, God.

This is all about a bunch of guys who are disgruntled with their wages. It’s an old story. The owner plays favorites and takes advantage of hard working people! It’s a travesty!

You know what they ought to do! Can we say this in Texas? You know what they really should do. They should...unionize! (O yes...but don’t tell the governor!) They

should stand together and demand better wages and while they are at it they should get a morning coffee break, a health care plan, and some retirement benefits!

That's what this scripture is all about, isn't it?

Well, maybe not. Maybe it's a parable, not a history of a labor dispute! A parable about what? Well, it told us in the first sentence, about "the kingdom of heaven."

Let's consider that. Jesus does talk a lot about the kingdom of heaven. Goes on and on about it, actually. But he's not really talking about what the kingdom of heaven will be like.

Thank goodness. I don't want to think of Heaven as being a work camp, with the saved becoming like migrant workers, moving from one job to the next for all eternity. That may be your vision of heaven but it's not mine!

Oh, I can't picture sitting on my duff for all eternity (boring!) but I think there will be things for us to do, to engage us in meaningful endeavors. Unfortunately Christianity hasn't spelled all that out! Unfortunately because that leaves the doors open for others to define it. Enter the Mormons, who tell their folks that when the faithful die they will become gods, each over a planet full of people seeking to do their bidding. (Yes, the Mormons do believe in millions of other planets full of people in the universe, all governed by a Mormon "god." Whew! Isn't that something to think about? If I was writing a cartoon, that might make a good story line!

We don't know exactly what God has in store for us but I'm betting it's not to be day laborers; each day standing on a corner in heaven till God puts us in the back of a pick-up truck and sends us off for the day!

This parable is not about what Heaven is like - it's about the people who are doing their best to get into heaven. People like you and me. In the parable they are the workers in the fields, God's fields.

I can buy that - that I am a worker, we are workers, all doing God's will, struggling to do our part in God's plan for the salvation of the world. I can buy that, can you?

Some of us have been working for God for a long time! I was ordained 31 years ago. Seems like just yesterday I was a snot-nosed kid with big ideas, not much self-discipline, and a whole lot to learn. I thank God for some very patient, caring

members who taught me what it was to be a good minister! Nowadays I occasionally have a younger minister ask my advice. Well, I try not to say anything stupid (wisdom is a bit of stretch for me) and I think to myself, isn't there anybody "mature" they can ask?

There are people here who have been on God's payroll for a whole lot longer than I have, both clergy and laity. Some of you were already hitched to God's yoke when I was born! I look around this room and there are a lot of people who answered God's call "early in the morning." Thank God for you and all you have done for God.

But after you, there are lots of others, people who accepted God's invitation wherever God found us: in the gym, at the office, at the lake, even in worship! And not all of us were 12 years old when we got the call. Some of us were middle aged or even senior citizens when God actually got through to us!

We are a lot like the workers who were recruited at nine o'clock, or noon or three o'clock or even 5 o'clock in the afternoon! We were not here at the beginning when the temperatures were nice and cool but are here now and we are willing and ready to work for God! We do our best to contribute. Thank God for all of you and all you have done for God.

In the parable the problem comes when the long time workers get paid. They get exactly what their contract calls for...but the late comers get paid exactly the same wage. The latecomers are surprised, pleasantly but the early birds thought they would be rewarded for all their extra work. And truthfully, that only seems fair.

Think back to the last time God paid us. Did we all get the same sized check regardless of how long we had worked?

Oh, right! God hasn't paid us yet! And God doesn't pay us in dollars or or Euros or stock options or gold bullion. What is it that God gives to the faithful? A place in God's Kingdom (heaven.)

I'm not asking if you want to go right now but...who here wants to go to Heaven? Isn't that what we really want from God? And doesn't it beat the alternative?

Stop for a moment. I have to tell you that the Apostle Paul and I are really uncomfortable with the thought that people might think they could earn their way into God's kingdom. Paul spent a lot of his ministry telling people that the only way to get

saved was by having faith in Jesus. Paul and I have allowed this sermon to slide as long as you remember it is a parable, a story meant to make a point not to describe the actual process of salvation! OK? Good.

Back to the parable. It ends up with a lot of workers who want more. More than what God gives to all believers. So we can say that they wanted "Heaven plus."

What does that mean? Does it mean they want stars in their crown, sort of like a soldier's medals? Does it mean they want to live in a big house in a heavenly neighborhood instead of a shanty just barely inside the gates? Does it mean they want bigger, better wings (I guess size matters) and a shinier halo? Does it mean they want a weekly tee time at heaven's number one country club instead of having to walk on a muni course with others who feel lucky to just be there?

So, is heaven like Cowboy Stadium – a multi-tiered place with luxury suits for the major donors, end zone seats for the entry level contributors, and other accommodations depending on how much you have contributed?

Honestly, such an image is deeply troubling to me. It makes me imagine a conversation with St. Peter:

"A, a, a, St. Peter? Down here, sir. John Burton. Can, can I come in?"

"John Burton? Really? Well that's a hundred dollars I owe St. Paul. Oh well. Come in? You want to come in? Well, I guess so. Apparently you just made the cut. Your ticket provides accommodations at the Motel 6, meal services at Bob's Greasy Spoon, one set of junior wings, and I see that you are pre-enrolled in a remedial theology class."

"Ah, when do I get to meet Jesus?"

"Jesus? Well at your ticket level I think I can get you an end zone seat the next time he has a "private audience" for newcomers down at the stadium."

"Well, can I join the Country Club?"

"Let's see. Looks like your combined total of baptisms, funerals, hospital calls, and sermons is about 100 short of qualifying for membership. Sorry. There is an old muni

course where you can walk on but you'll have to carry your own bag because the carts are falling apart. Still, it's better than nothing!"

Is that the way you see heaven? -- It's not the way Jesus sees it!

In the parable all the people who accept Jesus invitation got the full reward - not because they earned it but because the Lord desired it to be so.

If we are faithful to Jesus then we get the equivalent of an all-stadium pass at Cowboys Stadium - we get to sit in the leather Lazyboys in the luxury boxes, eat from the owner's buffet, and stand on the sidelines with the all-stars.

Isn't that a heavenly thought for all those who work to be good and please God!