



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 20, 2026
EXODUS 16:2-15; PSALM 105: 1-6, 37-45; ACTS 2:14-21, 32-33; MATTHEW 20:1-16

THE RADICAL GENEROSITY OF GOD

Matthew 20:1-16 [Jesus said, "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 marketplace; 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."]

REPENT and REPAIR. These words are part of a theme for this Sunday at St. Mark's. I hope you will take a few moments to visit the Affordable Housing Project Visual Storyboards in the Compline corner of our nave today. They recount the story of racially motivated restrictive covenants in our neighborhood that were designed to keep black families

out. St. Mark's parish purchased this land just as these covenants were being written into property deeds. As far as we know, our deeds never contained this language, but our faith community remained silent while this was going on. Furthermore, we are reconciling with the fact that we were a predominantly white church that chose to build in a whites-

only neighborhood. We harmed our neighborhood and our black siblings by participating in this systematic process of exclusion. Today, our thirst for justice and accountability has demanded that we repent of the evil we have done as we seek to repair it. Repent and repair. It's what justice requires and the Gospel demands of folks like us who claim to be followers of Jesus.

Our Gospel today doesn't address racial justice directly, but it says a lot about fairness. What we learn is that our deep-seated sense of fairness is not God's fairness. For our sense of fairness is rooted in scarcity while God's fairness is found in abundance and generosity.

I have one sibling, my brother, Jack, who is three and half years younger than me. When we were kids, we fought like crazy. I remember us both being in the back seat of our family car as we were arguing about the proper distribution of hard candy from a bag that my mom gave to pacify us. As our bickering escalated, my mother intervened from the front seat with a directive. I'm sure that she offered a reasonable and fair solution, but my brother whined, "It's not FAIR!" My mother had had enough. She pulled the car over, got into the back seat, sitting between us, and said, "Listen you two. Life isn't fair. You're being selfish and stingy. I gave you the candy. I'm still waiting to hear 'thank you!'" She was right. Our sense of fairness was informed

by scarcity. We completely ignored her generosity. It took me many more years to learn through the school of hard knocks that life really isn't fair.

This scarcity-based sense of fairness is what Jesus is confronting in our Gospel today. You heard the story. The vineyard workers who arrived late and worked for one hour got paid the same amount and those who worked from dawn. Doesn't that offend your sense of fairness? I hope it does. It's supposed to.

After all, we know what fairness is, and we know how it's supposed to play out. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is not fair. Rewarding hard work and ambition is fair. Excusing sloth and sloppiness is not fair.

But God, if the landowner in the parable represents God, is not fair. At least, not according to our deeply held beliefs about fairness. God, it turns out, does not believe that the front of the line is the best place to be. God isn't interested, in showing favor to the best, the biggest, and the brightest -- the workers with the most elite educations, those with astonishing professional achievements, and the most impressive zip codes.

In fact, the landowner in Jesus's story doesn't judge his workers by their hours at all. He doesn't seem to care about why some workers are able to start at dawn and others come later. Perhaps the late starters aren't as literate, educated, or

skilled as their competitors. Perhaps they have learning challenges, or a tough home life, or children to care for at home. Perhaps they're refugees, or don't own cars, or don't speak the language, or can't get green cards. Perhaps they struggle with chronic depression or anxiety. Perhaps employers refuse to hire them because they're gay, or trans, or disabled, or black, or female.

Whatever the case may be, the landowner doesn't ask them to explain or defend themselves. All he cares about is that every last person in the marketplace finds a spot in his vineyard – the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirm, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten. When the workday is over, what concerns the landowner is not who deserves what. All he cares about is that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage. The capacity to go home and feed a family. Sufficient security and peace of mind to sleep well. A reliable sense of accomplishment, belonging, and dignity. It's an image of the Reign of God.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" asks God.

I must tell you. I really struggle with this. You see, I'm a recovering type-A personality. I'm an Enneagram 3, the Achiever and Performer. My sense of worth and value are wrapped up in being the first in line at dawn and completing the best possible work at the end of the

day. AND, I expect to be recognized for it! But Jesus is inviting me to place myself at the end of the line. Things look different from that perspective. Jesus has invited me to join the workers who got more than they expected – the ones who received twelve times the pay they knew they deserved. I'm invited to be ecstatic, stunned, thrilled, and grateful with those at the end of the line. Their experience of payday was one of utter blessing. I was just expecting to get what was owed to me.

If I keep myself at the front of the line I experience a host of difficult emotions – envy, bitterness, anger, and dissatisfaction. I'm too resentful to join in the celebration of those at the end of the line. I miss out. I don't take satisfaction in my hours of good work. I don't delight in the fruit of the vineyard. I don't relax into my time off, enjoying the wages I have been given. Instead, I waste my off-hours harboring resentment and anger.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" God asks.

Maybe, if God's generosity offends me, it's because I don't have eyes to see where I stand in the line of God's grace and kindness. Where would you rather stand? At the front of the line, where bitterness and judgment consume you? Or at the back, where surprise and joy reign supreme?

I don't think it's a coincidence that the landowner insists on paying his workers in reverse order, thereby making sure that the first workers see what the last receive. He wants them to experience what radical generosity looks like. He wants them to relinquish their anger and join the party. He wants them to use their plenty to build longer tables, not higher walls.

Could it be any more obvious that we – *all of us, every single one of us* – are wholly dependent on each other for our survival and well-being? That the future of Creation itself depends on human beings recognizing our fundamental

interconnectedness, and acting in concert for the good of all? What's fair for me isn't good enough if it leaves you in the darkness to die. The vineyards of this world thrive only when everyone has a place of dignity and purpose within them. The time for selfish and stingy notions of fairness is over.

Are we willing to see this yet? Are we willing to live it?

"Listen. Life isn't fair. You're being selfish and stingy. I gave you the candy. I'm still waiting to hear 'thank you!'" You know, she's still waiting. Let's make this right. Thank you, mom, and thank you, God!



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!