

Matthew 20:1-16
Sermon manuscript on next page

[*Jesus said to the disciples:*] ¹“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So, they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And 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?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When 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.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Text Matthew 20:1-16; Philippians 1:21-30; Psalm 145:1-8; Jonah 3:10-4:4:11
 Theme Grace beyond Envy
 Subject Parable: Workers in the Vineyard and the difficulty with grace
 Occasion 12th after Pentecost – September 20, 2020 – New Song ECUSA via Zoom

Lesley & I are approaching our 50th wedding anniversary:

Sometimes referred to as the Golden Anniversary

As the occasion of our first wedding anniversary neared, I had heard 1st anniversary gifts are to be paper

So, I wrote Lesley a check for \$1,000,000

And I presented her with Parker Brother's game of *Monopoly*

We still have it and all the pieces

During the pandemic we got the game out and have played it on the dining room table

Since no one is coming for dinner, the game was there on the ready

Some games lasted longer so we would take breaks

And though we were playing a game, events continued to swirl about in the world

We began to wondering about what the game *Monopoly* teaches

The game is designed as a win/lose game

I learned Lesley is a keen player – eager to own railroads and utilities

One afternoon Lesley noticed, the “Income” space favors the 1%

On that space a player pays either 10% of the value of all money and property or pays \$200.

At that particular moment I had only a few dollars and properties

I mortgaged some properties and paid the 10%

At the time, Lesley was flush with cash, property, houses and hotels – she only would pay \$200

Our eyes began to open

We began to notice other curiosities like “Get Out of Jail Free” cards

What if someone learned about LIFE & BUSINESS & RELATIONSHIPS by playing *Monopoly*?

Learning to think of life as a win/lose game

Learning money and property are the measures of success

Learning others do not matter; stay focused on winning

Before us is this teaching from Jesus

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. (Mt 20:1)

By the end of the story we might suppose the hearers learned from *Monopoly*

Remember, Matthew is telling readers **the kingdom of heaven has (approached)** (3:2)

As the narrative spins out, there is *always this thread of the approaching kingdom*

Increasingly we learn this coming kingdom is different

I'll pick up the thread when Jesus talked about a shepherd with 100 sheep (18:12-14)

When one is lost, the shepherd goes to find it and **rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So, it is *not* the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.**

The thread immediately leads to a church administration question:

What to do **If another member of the church sins against you**, (15ff)

As each level of confrontation fails, Jesus finally teaches,

let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (17)

We've been paying attention: *these are the people Jesus has been with* (9:10; 11:19)

The thread leads to wondering: **how often should I forgive? ...7 Times?** (18:21)

Seventy-seven times says Jesus (22)

Last week the thread led us to learn about how a master would respond to an indebted servant's plea for mercy – the entire debt forgiven (18:21-35)

We expected that given what we've heard – SEEKING, FINDING, FORGIVING

Matthew's telling has Jesus leave Gentile Galilee and the thread takes us to Jewish Judah

There he faces an ultimate question

what good deed must I do to have eternal life? (19:16)

Is there something I can do to win the game?

Yes, keep the commandments

Oh, you do that?

Then give to the poor everything you have

He couldn't do it – leaves in tears – couldn't pay for his victory

Peter's seems all smiles

we have left everything & followed you. What then will we have? (19:27)

Matthew says Jesus provided some assurances and concluded

Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. (30)

Exactly where our reading ends: **the last will be first, & the first will be last** (16)

Here Matthew's thread leads to the story for us today: THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

A quick summary and reminder:

The landowner hires workers early – paying a day's wage

Goes out again at 9:00, at noon, at 3:00 and even about 5:00 (telling these they'll be paid "**what's right**")

Do NOT get tangled in this simile – imagining details that aren't there

No labor union would support such a contract – NOT FAIR

No business owner would support such a practice – COULDN'T AFFORD IT

The thread is being woven deeply into the fabric of the approaching kingdom of heaven – the good news of **Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham** (1:1)

Brené Brown tells of her return to church after having been away for 25 years

Not only away from the church but *against* it

The Sunday she came back, this was the reading

She was infuriated – it’s not fair, right or just

Her view of justice was that a person over paid would have their wagon break down and they’d need the overpayment to pay for repairs.

But she kept coming back

She volunteered to teach VBS and she taught this very story

She used *Monopoly* money as payment to illustrate the story

She had some of her students start doing jumping jacks for 5 minutes for \$500

About half way thru she had other students start

With only a few seconds remaining she had the last students start

Then she gave the first students \$500 bills

and on down the line giving each student a \$500 bill

“The kids went crazy and said ‘that is not fair’”

Brené agreed, it’s not fair – *“I still don’t get it”*

But students understood *“that’s the way God’s love is”*

Brené likes *“stuff you can earn”*

She acknowledges, when she isn’t her best self, says or does something she’s ashamed of, she reminds herself, she still gets the \$500

Grace is not very attractive in a culture of meritocracy

This thread toward radical grace has reminded me of the 7 deadly sins”

Pride, greed, lust, envy, glutton, wrath, sloth

Particularly *envy* evident among the workers completing work in the vineyard

To illustrate I remind you of a study of fairness (or envy) done with 2 capuchin monkeys

To learn where our distaste for unfairness comes from: learned or hardwired

Pairs of monkeys were placed in adjacent cages where they could see each other, and trained to take turns giving small rocks to their human handler.

Each time a monkey gave a rock, she received a piece of cucumber as a reward.

(Capuchins love cucumbers, so both monkeys found this arrangement satisfactory, and handed over their rocks with enthusiasm.)

But then, the handler changed things up. After a few fair and even exchanges, the handler rewarded the first monkey with a chunk of cucumber as usual, but gave the second monkey a grape— the equivalent of fine wine or caviar in monkey world.

Seeing that the game had changed for the better, the first monkey perked up, and very eagerly handed over another rock, expecting to receive a grape too.

But no— the handler gave her a piece of cucumber. To make things worse, the handler then gave the second monkey another grape for free!

The first monkey was furious. Not only did she refuse to eat the cucumber; she hurled it at the handler’s face. She banged the bars of the cage, threw her remaining rocks in every direction, and made furious gestures at her grape-eating companion.

Scientists have also studied the development of fairness in human babies and found that infants as young as nine months old will react strongly and negatively to perceived unfairness.

The experiment led to the conclusion fairness/envy is deeply rooted in us.

 Back then to the story of The Laborers in the Vineyard:

When the long workday is over, the landowner pays every worker the same, the laborers who started at the crack of dawn complain.

In response, the landowner deflects their accusations with a question:

“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (15)

Writer Mary Gordon, in her book *Reading Jesus* answers God’s question honestly as one of the workers.

“Yes, I am envious because you are generous. I am envious because my work has not been rewarded. I am envious because someone has gotten away with something. Envy has eaten out my heart.”

Envy is a deadly – it reveals how driven we are to be recognized and counted the winner

 A little more on *Monopoly* and how it might practice a kingdom of heaven reality

This means imagining new rules – rules where winning isn’t crushing into others bankruptcy isn’t an objective or having all the money

Perhaps the 4 railroads and 2 utilities were owned by all the players from the beginning?

Payment for these would be paid to *Free Parking*

If someone lands on *Free Parking*, the money is shared equally with players

The goal could be to play as long as possible or count how often we circuit the board

New rules toward new learning – new learning to change lives and cultures

 Back in December a dear friend died.

We’d known each for nearly 50 years; these last 15 years we’d grown closer;

in his last 3 months I sent him at least 1 text every week

sometimes he could respond but generally not

The rare gift he gave me and likely everyone he met

He never listened to win

He did not compare and despair – he held no envy toward anyone

He cheered, encouraged, sometimes pushed

He was always ready to forgive

He understood the vineyard of this world thrives when everyone has a place of dignity and purpose within it

When all selfish and stingy notions of fairness and envy are ended

 Some have been following Jesus for a long time, some less so, some only recently

Matthew’s thread is taking us next to the way of the cross – *we’ll all get to heaven*