Mt. 20: 1-16

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. 3 About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 7 Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 9 The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' 13 But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

DISCUSSION QUESTION: By paying the last hired first, Jesus sets up a teaching moment. What lesson have you learned from this parable?

PRAYER: Teacher Jesus, you reach for every conceivable way to stretch my understanding of God’s unconditional love. I find myself coming to this parable with different responses each time I encounter it. When I am feeling secure, I celebrate that everyone has enough and marvel at God’s generosity. When I am feeling afraid or unappreciated, I find my first response like a two year old screaming “that’s not fair”. Help me to grow into a secure adult understanding of what God is teaching me through you in this parable. Amen.
WORD STUDY AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

LANDOWNER / OWNER: Using first century examples Jesus tries to get people to “think out of the box” of customary thinking. He often does this by setting up exaggerated examples to make a point.

What is your first response to this parable? How does Jesus help you to think out of “the box”?

EARLY / THIRD / SIXTH / NINTH / ELEVENTH / EVENING / ONE HOUR: Our story starts out early in the morning. Each shift received the same pay, making all equal to one hour’s work.

What implication does this have for what it is like in God’s reality? Do you like the implication? When did you enter the workforce of the vineyard?

HIRE / HIRED: The landowner is intimately involved with the vineyard and the workers hired.

Do you experience the “landowner” as personally involved with you and your life?

WORK / WORKERS / HEAT: Some saw themselves lucky to be hired at all, others see themselves as abused and undervalued.

Was your first response to this story one of unfairness or of generosity?

VINEYARD: Scripture often compares Israel as God’s vineyard. Today Jesus might have used the office, home or factory as an example.

Do you see your place of work as God’s vineyard? If so, what insight does this parable bring to that place?

PAY / DENARIUS: The standard days wage for unskilled labor was a denarius. It was a living wage.

What is a standard day’s wages for unskilled labor today? Is it a living wage? If not, what would the employer have to do to come in line with the point of this parable?

DOING NOTHING / STANDING AROUND: Those available for hire went to an arranged site and waited for someone to hire them. Evidently, people arrived at this site on different times of the day.

What time of day did you arrive to offer yourself to work in the vineyard? Was this the first place you put yourself out there this day?

If you came later in the day, what kept you from coming earlier?

RIGHT / UNFAIR: The first group hired was told that they would get the standard wage for the day. All others were told that they would get what was fair.

Even though all got what was ‘right’, some thought what they received was unfair. What standard were they using?

NO ONE HAS HIRED US: When questioned about their standing around, the last group indicates their willingness to work, just a lack of opportunity.

What opportunities do you have to help with the harvest of the kingdom? Is there anything keeping you from helping at this time? If so, what is it?

FOREMAN: The foreman does as he is told without question.

What impression might the owner make on the foreman? What lesson did the disciples (who were always looking for rewards) receive?

HIRED FIRST / HIRED LAST: Matthew’s Jewish community probably saw themselves in the first group, and the gentile community the last.

If you were Matthew, dealing with interchurch rivalry, how could this parable help you?

EXPECTED: Expectations arise whenever hope exists.

If the foreman had paid the laborers beginning with the first and then going down to the last, how might this story be different? What point is Jesus making about God by setting things up this way?

MORE: Those hired first were assured of having enough to take care of their families. The devout are most susceptible, because they often think they deserve more.

What lies behind this kind of thinking? Do you struggle with this temptation?

GRUMBLE: Frustration = grumbling. Grumbling bring on resentment. Resentment is a form of violence.

If you would have been one of the early workers, do you think you would also have been a grumbler?
We want merit pay, and not minimum wage.

In the end, Jesus simply says that the community of believers in him, the people of the Gospel way of life, who are willing to risk taking him who is the Word at his word are his Church. Pg. 150. Parr, Raymond. Process Person Presence. Thomas More Press, Chicago. 1990.

We want merit pay, and not minimum wage. Fr. Robert Beck
Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons during the final quarter of the 2nd century, was dealing with the development of thought called Gnosticism. In attacking the Valentinian Gnostics he uses this parable in chapter one, section three, vs. 4, to refute one of their claims. Ehrman, Bart. After the New Testament. NY. Oxford Univ. Press. 1999. Pg. 198.

What frightens and frees us simultaneously about this new and alien kingdom of God which Jesus preached and told of is the simple fact that it is God’s and not our own. That is a dark menace to the complacency and contentment of those who flourish under the kingdoms of this world; a shining vision of release and new beginnings to the victims of the present order; and perhaps also a mocking rebuke to the programs, projects, and pride of those who hope to create a new order by themselves. Page 23.


Jesus may be telling us that rewards may not be handed out in God’s domain in relation to time devoted to merit accumulated. God rewards according to the divine concepts of equity. The Holy One works in a different way. God’s gracious, merciful love is bestowed equally on those the Eternal chooses. We should not be jealous or envious; however, no one will receive less than what he or she expected. In addition to the notion of divine reward, this parable reflected also the principle of grace, which was so important to Jesus. Even if one does not repent, there is divine grace, which will overcome the divine wrath. God’s mercy will prevail over God’s anger. Page 166. Bruteau, Beatrice. Jesus through Jewish Eyes. Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books. 2001.

In the end, Jesus simply says that the community of believers in him, the people of the Gospel way of life, who are willing to risk taking him who is the Word at his word are his Church. Pg. 150. Parr, Raymond. Process Person Presence. Thomas More Press, Chicago. 1990.

Matthew guides the reader to an identity grounded in liminal communitas which includes a radical egalitarianism. This egalitarian way of life overturns the hierarchical household code fundamental to first-century life. Pg. 23.


Jealousy arises easily in our hearts. In the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, the workers who worked the while day are jealous that those who came in at the eleventh hour received the same pay as they did. But the landowner says, “Why should you be envious because I am generous?” When we truly enjoy God’s unlimited generosity, we will be grateful for what our brothers and sisters receive. Jealousy will simply have no place in our hearts. Nouwen, Henri. Bread For the Journey. NY. HarperSanFrancisco. 1977. Page July 6.

(Could this be a sample of today’s response?) A GROUP of children have set up a lemonade stand on a hot summer's day. A man walks down the street, buys two glasses of lemonade, gulps them down quickly, and is informed that they are 10 cents apiece. He gives the kids a dollar, says it was delicious lemonade, and walks away. The kids eye him suspiciously. They only asked for 20 cents. What's the matter with him? Why has he given them a dollar? A quarter, even a half-dollar would be all right. A dollar is too much. They go into the house and discuss the matter with their mother. She frowns. What kind of a man is it who gives a dollar for two glasses of lemonade that isn't all that good anyhow? She warns her children not to sell lemonade to the man if he comes back but to come in and tell her if he tries to give them another dollar. She then calls her next-door neighbor and wonders whether the police ought to be informed. If there's a strange man in the neighborhood that is acting crazy paying a dollar for two glasses of lemonade—perhaps the police ought to know about it. Greeley, Andrew. When Life Hurts. Thomas More Press, Chicago. 1988. Page 47.

Such a system was extremely difficult for peasants and small farmers. Not only did they have to meet the demands of the elite, they also had to supply their own household’s needs through their own production and through barter or purchase, as well as ensure sufficient livestock and seed for the next year, while at the mercy of weather, soil quality, political events, the whims of the elite. If the yield could not sustain a household, some left to eke out a living in the city, perhaps as day laborers (especially during planting and harvest, as in Mt. 20: 1-6), or in some service or trade employment. The system meant that many peasants lived constantly close to famine and subsistence, with poor nutrition, poor health, endless hard work, and perpetual vulnerability.


“Consider who you were and endeavor to know yourself, which is the most difficult point of knowledge imaginable. The knowledge of yourself will keep you from vanity.” – Miguel de Cervantes,

20.1–16: The parable of the workers in the vineyard. 1: His vineyard, Israel (21.33; Isa 5; Jer 12.1–4). 2: Daily wage, Gk "denarius" (18.28; 20.10; 22.19). 8: When evening came, laborers were to be paid on the day they performed the work (Lev 19.13; Deut 24.14–15). Owner, Gk “kyrios,” “Lord” (cf. m. Avot 2.14). Beginning with the last, the owner sets up the first hired to believe they will receive more than those hired last. 12: You have made them equal to us, the issue is not when one follows Jesus, but that one


SUGGESTED READINGS:
Links to all the books mentioned in this guide are on The Ark web site: www.theark1.com
https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/god-doesnt-see-things-our-perspective