

Matthew 20:1-16    17th Sunday after Pentecost    September 22, 1996

*“For 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.”*

Ten years ago yesterday I was installed as your pastor. A few things I remember from that service: The choir sang, Alleluia, alleluia. There were 166 people present that day. And I remember that the wine went down my wind pipe when I received communion and that as I distributed communion I had a terrible time saying, “The blood of Christ shed for you,” and “The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you and keep you in his grace.” I kept coughing and couldn't make my voice work.

I remember the reception for my family and me that day, the beautiful and tasty cake, the stream of new faces and names, the warmth of your welcome. Though we were strangers I did not feel as if I was being evaluated so much as I was being received.

Now, ten years later some things are much the same. At any time the choir might sing Alleluia once again, it is still a favorite for me and many of you. Most any Sunday the wine could go down my wind pipe and I could have trouble talking. We still call on Esther Bolden for those delicious cakes from time to time. And I still feel more as if I am being received than as if I am being evaluated. But one thing is different: I have given ten years of faithful service that my heart says should count for something.

It hasn't always been easy. Lots of mornings I would have rathered roll over in bed or head for the golf course than go to work. So many evenings I wished I could have stayed home

with my family but I was here at meetings or in your homes visiting with you. I have had to apologize to many of you these past ten years, keep trying when others were not trying as hard, smile when others got credit for something I had made possible.

All of that must count for something with God, with you. All of the offerings my family has given, the sacrifices I and they have made, surely there is some extra credit due me for that - from you - from God.

Many of you know what I am talking about. While others were home with their feet propped up, watching the Indians you have been here, helping, serving planning. While others were at the mall you were preparing the altar, or putting up Christmas decorations or practicing music for the coming Sunday.

While others were relaxing over coffee on a Sunday morning, you were teaching their children.

Your offerings repaired the roof, fixed the floor, paid for the furnace and now new people come and receive all the benefit for what you have done.

Surely your sacrifice counts for something with God, with the people here. Yes, many of you know exactly how I feel.

So I arrive this morning and I read the gospel for today. The kingdom of heaven is like workers all hired at different times, some working a long hard day, others investing but an instant, and they all get paid the same.

The ones who worked long and hard complained. "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."

Equal to us.

Doesn't everything I have done count for something? Can't the high givers count on some special treatment around here, special treatment before God? Why the building will be empty on Tuesday nights and Thursday nights and Wednesday nights if there is no reward. The offering plate will be empty this morning if there is no reward. Who wants to be the older brother who stays home and works if the wasting and partying brother is received home with a celebration? Who wants to be Jonah, one of God's people if the murderous enemy is pardoned? "Pardoned after all they did to us?" Israel might have cried. "Pardoned?"

This is my church; I have earned my say here. Why should we listen to some newcomer?

This is my church, why should we let music that appeals to the young or African Americans or Hispanics come into our church? Why should we listen to newcomers, let them earn their place.

This is my church, I have sacrificed the ten best years of my life here, I should get my way.

But God forgives the people of Nineveh. God pays everyone as if they had worked the whole day. God is not much impressed by our extra credit projects.

Love - God's love that knows no limits will rule here. Not credits we accumulate. God's love in Jesus Christ is a full day's wage for you, for me. Jesus is everything God has to give – he is all that matters - all we need.

Sometimes I forget and think that all of you are gathered here so I can make a name for myself. How sad.

How sad when any of you are like me, forgetting Christ, thinking about yourself.

“The last will be first, the first last,” Jesus says. But that will not matter as long as I am in him, as long as you are in him. Not what we do, we earn but his cross, his resurrection - these will be our glory - today, and for all eternity. Amen.