



**THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
SEPTEMBER 20, 2020
MATTHEW 20: 1-16
“ENTITLED TO WHAT?”**

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

“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.’

“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These 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.’

“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

SERMON

My most physically challenging job was delivering appliances for sears one summer in the district of Columbia.



First, in the summer, dc is oppressively hot and humid.

Second, most deliveries included taking out old appliances. Leaky, broken-down appliances.

Third, too many deliveries involved narrow back-breaking staircases.

And fourth, appliances were really heavy back in 1970.

So, if i had spent eight hours delivering appliances in terrible conditions and the guy who is hired for the eighth hour is paid the same as me, I'm going to be upset.

As would every one of us.

Fair is fair, right? And we have rights. And we deserve what we deserve.

Just think of all the attorney commercials that tell us they will fight for our rights; fight for what we deserve.

A school hands out free turkeys at thanksgiving and people want to know where are the sides?

An artist friend of mine hires a young man to mentor and to help out around his gallery and the kid quits after the second day because he isn't going to sweep floors, even though the artist had done it for years.

We're entitled. We deserve better. Things need to fair, according to our standards. I hate to say it, but often churches are the worst.

A woman in my first congregation quit coming to worship because a first-time visitor happened to sit in her spot in the pew. That was her seat!

I don't know how many times I've been told, "pastor I was here before you came, and I'll be here after you're gone." Which generally means "don't cross me."

Or the number of people who say, "this is my church" which usually means they deserve special treatment in some way.

We're entitled.

How many Karen's are there who tell people of color they don't belong in their own neighborhoods or act as though it is their job to police public spaces.



How many teachers, administrators, and coaches have to deal with parents who believe their child deserves special treatment?

We're immersed in a narcissistic culture where we are all entitled.
And so, who among us would stand for someone to be paid the same wage for doing far less work?

This is called an economy of merit. That is, we base our worth on accomplishment, achievement, performance, appearance, status, or worthiness of some sort.

From the time we are children, we are rated on our performance:
Are we good enough to make the sports team?
How good are our grades?
Are we in with the cool kids?
Did we do our chores around the house and did we do them well?

There's nothing wrong with living according to certain standards and an economy of merit except when it comes to the spiritual life.

Here, the rules are different. But we are so contained and defined by an economy of merit that it takes some personal experience that breaks down these human agreed-upon rules for us to see things in a different light....

After my father was accused of embezzlement, after my mother had been murdered, and after my father later committed suicide, I was in therapy. Perhaps you won't find that surprising.

And my therapist at the time asked me to complete the Minnesota multiphasal personality inventory. This inventory assesses personality traits and psychopathology, which is a big word for where we are particularly dysfunctional.

So, I did and later returned to his office for feedback.

He said something like: "Scott, given your life experience you should be much worse off than you are. You need to find out why and for what you've been saved."

I should have been much worse off psychologically, but I wasn't.

Due to my own merit, my actions, my efforts?



No, this is one experience that moved me from a world of human worthiness to a world of God's graciousness.

But here's where it gets tricky.

It seems like I was given a particularly strong psychological makeup. Given is the important word. We might say gift,

From a child, I was the eternal optimist.

In boxing, it's not how hard you can hit, but how hard you can take a hit.

For some reason, some graceful reason, I can take blow after blow and remain standing and sane.

But we can't go down the alley of why me and not the next guy who turns out to be less psychologically strong.

Maybe the trade-off is that I have autoimmune deficiencies. Who knows?

But we all need the experience of discovering God's graciousness replacing our economy of merit.

I am unworthy, but I got it any way.

Richard Rohr advises that we need to stop counting.

What he means is that many of us are caught up in the logic of "I gave that much, so I get this much."

This is the world of expectations.

And expectations are nothing but resentments waiting to happen.

Our parable is the perfect example.

I worked all day and I expect to be paid more than the gal who worked an hour less and much more than the guy who worked seven hours less.

And now I am angry and resentful and the hell with God, right? Because it's just not fair! And life is supposed to be fair.



Really?

A key to the parable is when the landowner asks, “are you envious because I am generous?”

Envy, one of the seven deadly sins, often is confused with jealousy. It’s important, though, to know the difference. If nothing else, you’ll impress people at the cocktail party.

If your spouse is being flirtatious with someone, this could lead to jealousy, not envy.

Envy is a more complicated beast. It occurs when you encounter someone who has some quality or talent that you don’t. So, I might be envious of someone who is a much better pianist or who is pastor of a much larger congregation.

Envy also has a second element. Envy causes us to lose touch with our own strengths or assets, so when I am gripped by envy, I denigrate my own keyboard skills, or I lose touch with the joys of being pastor here at clc.

There is also a third element where envy drives us to damage the person with whom we’re envious. We will tear them down, criticize them, attack their character and so on.

So, we want to stay away from envy or learn to recognize it when we’re gripped by it.

And as long as we live in the world of worthiness and merit, we will be vulnerable to envy. Without grace, everything human deteriorates into smallness, hurt, and blame.

If we have encountered undeserved love—grace—then we might even be happy when someone else receives good fortune.

What a novel idea!

In a world of God’s generosity, we realize everything is free.

What do I deserve?

Not a damn thing!

What do I freely receive?

More goodness and grace that I can even fully identify.



We didn't deserve the sun coming up this morning. Or the fact that people actually love us in all our brokenness. Of that we naturally have a gift for construction, or music or teaching or engineering.

That we have food on the table or a gift for mathematics.

That we have scientists, health experts, and pharmaceutical companies working on a COVID vaccine.

That there is the smell of fall in the air.

It's all freely given by a God of grace.

So, as they say in twelve-step groups: how about an attitude of gratitude? Let's stop counting and let's stop expecting and let's stop with our rights and be grateful for all the unexpected goodness that comes our way.

SERMON SONG

Why Me? (Kris Kristofferson)