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One Generation to Another

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Psalm 145:1-8; Matthew 20:1-16

Those who give titles to passages of Scripture call this the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. I find that it would be equally correct to call it the Parable of the Generous Landowner. The landowner goes looking for people. When he finds them, he gives them something worthwhile to do. It does not matter if they are found early or late in the day, or sometime in-between. In every case, he shares with them a day's fair wage.

Jesus wants people to think of God in this way. God goes looking for people. We find it to be so throughout the Bible. When Adam and Eve hid, God went looking for them. In the dusty streets of Galilee, God went looking in the person of Christ, and when He found them, He gave them something important to do.

Christ's followers are "called" people — called out of idleness and indirection, called into an eternal purpose. Whenever Jesus finds people, He puts people to work. Anyone who has ever been out of a job will tell you about the person who called them and put them to work. They will speak of them highly, no matter what else may have transpired thereafter. Because they were called to do something, to make something, to share something of their abilities and energies ... and to get paid for doing it. Farewell to that gnawing question, "What will I do with my day, my life?" And hello to good work, and good recompense.

The landowner sent them into his vineyard. If you have been to a vineyard, you know it is a beautiful place. With the grape plants staked up row upon row, ambling over the gently rolling hills. There will be work to do there, and, while there are demands, they are not impossible. And the surroundings are so much better than many other places where one might end up working. No doubt, in the long day of attending to the vineyard, the workers would have a chance to look up, and see the beauty around them — to breathe in the air, and catch the scent of the ripening fruit; to enjoy the camaraderie of those alongside whom they work; to look out, at the end of the day, on a very romantic, traditional scene, and be able to see all they had accomplished. Yes, toil and the heat of the day are realities. One's muscles ache at the end of the day. But then, a hand extends and in that hand is a thank you for the work that has been done — a tangible thank you, the day's wage.

Christians might not usually think of their life in Jesus Christ in these terms. And the reality is that some parables strike home for some people while they glance off others, and we all have our set of favorites. So we may have missed this one, or its meaning. We may have limited ourselves to a "that was then and this is now" way of looking at it. We may say, I cannot identify with it, because I have never been in a vineyard let alone worked in one. But all of those are subtext. The main message is this: The landowner cares enough to seek and find you, to put you to work doing good things, and to reward you generously when you are done.

The workers in the parable went at different hours. They all worked as they were called to work. The reality is that their duty and our duty in the vineyard is to go to work as soon as the Lord calls us, and to do what the Lord tells us.

Jesus' parable highlights the generosity of God. As the ultimate "landowner," God will use what has always belonged to the Creator for the good of all — even if humans fail to view the world through God's eyes. How do you measure generosity? By definition, generosity is not measurable, accountable, or calculable. However we choose to read the parable, the word we hear in this passage is that, in the kingdom of heaven, the landowner is generous.

And there is another way to look at those workers who arrive early in the day, and the workers who arrive later.

It has happened to you. You have worked a long time on a particular project or goal. And, as the time goes on, the initial energy you had may have waned. And then, just at the right moment, someone shows up who is there to help. For you, personally, it is a joy.

I suspect that is how it is, generation after generation, among Christians. We arrive on the scene later in the “day” of Christian witness. Others have come before us. We can look out over the fields and see their accomplishments. And rather than just look and appreciate, we are asked pick up the task, so that one generation to another, we may engage in the call of Christ.

I know you are grateful for those who came before you. Some are members of your family. Some were your teachers. Some may have been the ministers of your church. And the line of faithful workers stretches back all the way to the people who first heard Jesus tell this parable. And it stretches forward, as you engage in the work and do your share.

Working in the landowner’s field seems to be an important part of the kingdom. Nowhere in the parable does Jesus say to the people who were lounging around in the marketplace, “That’s great; just stand there on the street corner and look cool. Take your ease, enjoy your day. Do not put forth any effort. Chillax — that’s the way to go.” I looked. There was not any such an attitude expressed, whether to the people who were called early, or late, or somewhere in-between. They were not called to sit in a hammock sipping on an Arnold Palmer. They were called to go into the vineyard and work. What does that say about Christians down through the ages? It says God has a work for them to do. Here is how the hymn says it:

*Some work today is mine,
A work for God to do,
God, be in the design,
God, make it good and true!*

*Some word today is mine,
A word of God’s to share,
God, make my message fine,
Filled with Your grace and care!*

*Some prayer today is mine,
A prayer for those in need,
I know God will incline
And offer help, indeed!*

*Some song today is mine,
A song that I may sing,
To cast the clouds away,
God’s hope and peace to bring!*

*A word, a work, maybe;
Perhaps a song, a prayer;
Some gift that God gave me;
A gift I am to share!*

(Hymn by John Dalles)

Out in Indiana Township, where we live, we have occasion to drive from Dorseyville to Route 8 along 910 — affectionately known as the Yellow Belt. As we do, we have the joy of driving past one of the prettiest settings in all of the area. And — you guessed it — it is a vineyard.

As we enjoy how beautiful it is, do you know, I never once thought to myself, a lot of work went into making it beautiful? Not until I read this parable anew — and then it struck me that every hand that goes into the work makes possible what you see today. And so it is with the church of Jesus Christ our Lord, when you answer the landowner’s call to come and share in the work. Amen.