

Grudges and Grace
Matthew 20:1-16
September 13, 2020
Beargrass Christian Church

I. INTRODUCTION.

A. Greetings!

1. First, thanks to all who attended the Labor Day eve service last Sunday.
2. We had a wonderful turnout on a beautiful evening.
3. And I hope you had a meaningful Labor Day holiday—although it has been my experience that too many of us don't ponder the reasons behind our celebrations.
4. Years ago many people worked on labor issues—and that work is not over.

B. In fact, labor issues have been in the news a lot lately.

1. The American labor movement is making headway.
2. Support for unions has risen to 65% in America.
3. Striking teachers and other groups have been rewarded.
4. Politicians are realizing that they need working-class votes.
5. Folks are pushing for legislation for paid family leave—only two countries in the world don't mandate it—we're one of them.
6. COVID has caused us to think about "essential" workers—and we have found that many of the most essential are paid the least.
7. People are now seeking not only equality—but equity—as we try to address issues that have been in our "system" for years.
8. More folks are trying to figure out what is right and just and fair.

C. Speaking of Labor Day, our story is about a different labor day.

1. There are many Bible passages with which we agree completely.
2. They are easy to comprehend, make sense, and don't disturb us.

D. But we have also found some tricky texts in the Good Book, such as this week's perplexing parable from Matthew 20.

1. The message that Jesus seems to be communicating grates against our understanding of what is fair, just, and appropriate.
2. Equal pay for unequal work—this just isn't right!?
3. I doubt this passage is on anyone's "favorite text" list.

E. Now, this is a great deal for the latecomers—but for those of us who consider ourselves "first comers," this is really irritating!

1. Have you ever experienced this kind of aggravation?
2. Are you the oldest child—have you complained again and again about the youngest child getting privileges far earlier than you did?
3. Have you stood in line for hours for great tickets for an event, only to see someone get in right away because they "know somebody?"
4. Have you worked somewhere for years, only to see newer employees getting more attention, more salary, and more benefits?

F. We know this story—we live this story every day—that is why it bothers us so much.

1. Jesus, what in the world are you talking about?!
2. This is no way to run a vineyard or a business or anything!
3. Can't you come up with a sliding scale or something like that?
4. Can't the government come up with some kind of form?

5. And pardon me, but this is no way to run a kingdom, either.
6. If the realm is like this, I'm not sure I want to be a part of it?!

II. **SOME CONTEXT FOR THE STORY MIGHT HELP US.**

- A. Jesus' words made more sense to the folks who first heard them than to us—unless we have some agricultural background.
 1. Labor conditions were tough, hours were long—from sunrise to sunset—and pay was minimal—around a dollar a day.
 2. Unemployment was rampant—folks tried to eke out a living.
 3. But during harvest time, it was not unusual for a landowner to hire people all day long in an effort to gather up the crop.
- B. My sister once dated a vineyard owner in Texas—yes, they drink other things besides Lone Star Beer and margaritas down there.
 1. When I toured the vineyard, I gained great appreciation for the massive work that goes into growing and harvesting the grapes.
 2. When it was time to gather grapes, he had to round up as many pickers as possible as quickly as he could.
- C. In the parable, the pickers are picked from 6:00 am to 5:00 pm.
 1. The 5:00 pm pickers are not only paid first but are paid the same as those who had experienced the wrath of grapes all day long.
 2. Those who were excited to get to work early become enraged!
 3. Someone once said: "Comparison is the thief of joy."
 4. They had been grabbing grapes twelve times as long!
 5. They do the math and beat a path to share their wrath.
 6. They carry picket signs that say, "You pay it or you pick it."
 7. Who knows, these may have been the original "pick it" signs!
 8. Reporters from local stations ask the spokesperson, who says, "Equal opportunity is fine, but not equal pay for unequal work!"
 9. The front-page headline in the Galilean Gazette the next morning reads: "Whining in Wine Country."
- D. So, what does the landowner do?
 1. Well, like politicians and CEOs, the landowner gets his manager and staff and PR people together to come up with a statement.
 2. And he comes up with a very good and reasonable one.
 3. "I'm doing you no wrong; you agreed for the daily wage, right?"
 4. "Aren't I allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"
 5. "Friends, are you envious...because I am generous?"
 6. Another translation is even more penetrating.
 7. "Friends, are your eyes evil...because I am good?"
- E. Wow...things become pretty quiet in a hurry at the vineyard.
 1. The cameras go off; the reporters go back to their offices.
 2. The workers stop whining; they put down their picket signs.
 3. One by one, they begin to drift away, thinking about the words.

III. **WELL, HOW DO YOU LIKE THE PARABLE NOW?**

- A. With whom do you identify in the story?
 1. Are you with the first-comers, the last-comers, the landowner?
 2. Where is God in the story—and why did Jesus share this tale about the whiners in wine country?

3. Is this a parable for the past, the “there and then,” or the future, the “if and when,” or the present, the “here and now?”
- B. Perhaps Jesus is trying to send a message to some of the folks who felt they were among the spiritually elite, the first-comers?
 1. Or maybe he was trying to get folks to accept the Gentiles?
 2. Or perhaps his target audience was even smaller?
 3. Maybe he was drilling the disciples, who were becoming threatened by Jesus’ growing numbers of new followers?
 4. Or is this is a future story—a description of that grand and glorious day when all of God’s children come to the Table?
- C. And what about us...are there ears that need to hear here?
 1. If this story is about God’s grace and mercy being given equally to first-comers and last-comers, do we want to be a part of it?
 2. If God’s realm looks like this, is it possible to incorporate this kind of thinking and behavior into our lives today?
- D. Now, be careful and prayerful before you say “Yes!”
 1. The message of the parable seems to stand diametrically opposed to our logical sense of justice and fairness.
 2. If this were an isolated story, we could pay less attention to it.
- E. But it is just one piece of a puzzling pattern of Jesus’ teachings.
 1. Remember the tale of the spoiled brat who was welcomed home by his forgiving father, despite blowing the family fortune?
 2. Remember the story of Jesus commending Mary, while her sister did all the cooking in the kitchen?
 3. Remember the time he said the woman’s small offering was more significant than the big gifts from the 1-percenters?
 4. Remember the Sermon on the Mount when everything gets turned upside down and backwards and inside out?
- F. Let’s be careful about this discipleship thing—it is likely to shake, rattle, and roll away some of the ways we are used to operating!
 1. Jesus challenges some of our ideas and notions about fairness.
 2. If the realm of God is like this, can we begin to celebrate with the latecomers rather than begrudging their blessings?
 3. Can we begin to incorporate this kind of behavior into our lives?
 4. Can we welcome the new student to class, embrace the latest team member, and include our most recent church member?
 5. Can we welcome a refugee to our community or country?
 6. Can we help a stranger find a place around the Table of Grace?
 7. If we do, new and different faces will gather around the Table.
- G. A comedian offered an insightful one-liner.
 1. “Don’t tell me you’re not my friend—nobody’s gonna tell me who my friends are.”
 2. Jesus says a similar thing: “Nobody’s going to tell me who my friends are.”
 3. And his friends...are supposed to be our friends.
- H. There is no place for envy or jealousy in the realm of God.
 1. This parable is not about a fair labor code or economic system.
 2. The story startles those who may have joined the Jesus parade because they were focused on “What’s in it for me?”

3. We don't do kingdom-work worrying about what we'll get.
 4. We don't join the procession so that we'll become rich or famous or have answers to all of our problems and questions.
 5. We go to work because the work itself is our gift!
 6. The work is an immeasurable honor and privilege!
 7. It carries its own reward because it brings us closer to God.
- I. When I am puzzled and perplexed by a parable one of my go-to authors is Robert Capon, who offers these ideas about this story.
1. "Bookkeeping is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of heaven, for in that joyful state of heaven the books are ignored forever.
 2. "In the Book of Life nothing stands against you."
 3. "There are no debit entries that can keep you out of the clutches of the Love that will not let you go."
 4. "There is no minimum balance below which the Grace that finagles all accounts will cancel your credit."
 5. "The last may be first and the first last, but that's only for the joy of making the point—everybody gets full pay!"
 6. "If the world could have been saved by bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses...not Jesus."
- J. And friends, whether we began working at 6:00 am or 5:00 pm...
1. This story gives us powerful reasons for great celebrations!
 2. This parable, my friends, is really...really Good News!