

“Work, Wages, and the Grace of God”  
September 3, 2023

I Corinthians 3:5-15  
Matthew 20:1-16

If you’ve been around here for a while, you know that Labor Day is one of my favorite holidays. And if you haven’t been around here, well, now all of you know.

One of the first words I learned as a child was “amalgamated.” Growing up in a city in which it seemed like everyone’s parents worked for Caterpillar, I had a father who was a negotiator for the Amalgamated Lithographers of America, the printers’ union. In high school and college, I was a card-carrying member of the American Federation of Musicians.

So, I’m drawn to words like those Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.” That is straightforward and fair. As the old union poster said, “An honest dollar for an honest day’s work.”

The combination of my union background and my understanding of the Bible led me to encourage our congregation to become an affiliate member of the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa over a decade ago. After all, the Center unites workers and community allies to stand up for the dignity and basic rights of all workers.

Over the years, with the support of this congregation and other organizations, the Center for Worker Justice has helped people recover more than \$150,000 in unpaid wages. And it has educated low-wage workers about their rights in the workplace.

So, I give thanks for the work for the Center. We can celebrate our support and affiliation.

Of course, the support that our congregation gives to this work is not a solution to all the problems. New challenges will continue to arise. But our commitments are a sign that what Jesus called the realm of heaven is breaking into our world, that justice is possible, that work will be rewarded.

Now, since I’ve been preaching from Matthew’s Gospel this summer, this morning we heard not only Paul’s stirring call to fairness and justice for workers but also that odd and troubling parable that Jesus told about the workers in the vineyard.

This is probably the least favorite Bible story for union people—an example of the capriciousness of employers and obviously an indication of the need for a better contract. If we heard a story like this told by workers in Iowa City, we might think it was another account of wage theft.

Yes, from the point of view of the owner of the vineyard, this *is* a story about just wages. Each worker was paid and all the workers were paid the wages to which they agreed. But there is something about this parable that troubles us.

Business owners hear this parable and say: “Well, that’s an interesting story, but you can’t expect us to operate that way. It would lead to chaos among the work force. The hardest workers wouldn’t have it.”

Union representatives respond: “We’re always glad to hear the Bible, but you can’t expect people to give up the just desserts of overtime and seniority.”<sup>i</sup> Our friend, Jen Sherer at the Labor Center over at the University would have nothing to do with this.

If you were in worship about a month ago you might remember that we then heard the parable of Jesus about the weeds and wheat—about a landowner, who, on discovering weeds had been planted in his field said leave the weeds alone and let them grow up with the wheat. And I told you how the twentieth century social ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr said of this tale: “This is a parable taken from agriculture to illustrate a point of morals, and it violates every principle of agriculture and of morals.”<sup>ii</sup>

What we heard this morning is a parable taken from the world of work to illustrate a point of justice that violates every principle of labor and justice.

Once again, as we listen to Jesus, we’re left asking: “What’s going on here?”

Jesus would have us believe that the realm of heaven is something like this. And as I’ve said before, when Jesus speaks of the realm of heaven, he is not, primarily, talking about what will or won’t happen to us when we die. This is not a story about being “rewarded” for our work or our faithfulness after death. This is a story about the way in which God’s realm of justice is coming into our broken world and our broken lives even now. This is a story about the strange yet compassionate way in which God is at work in our world and our lives.

The more I listen to this passage, the more I get a sense that Jesus is not talking simply about work and wages. He is talking about how we live and about our attitude toward all of life.

He’s talking about “grace.”

Now, grace is one of those religious words that is often used but less often understood.

Frederick Buechner says that grace is something we can never *get*. It can only be *given*. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about—any more than we can “deserve” the taste of fresh blueberries or “earn” good looks or bring about our own birth.<sup>iii</sup>

He adds, “The grace of God means something like [God saying to us]: ‘Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are*, because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us...I love you.’

“There’s only one catch, however. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it.”

The realm of heaven is about justice—getting what we deserve.

And even more, the realm of heaven is about grace—getting what we don’t deserve, those times when the last become the first.

The problem arises because all of us some of the time and some of us all of the time really don't like it when grace happens to someone else.

We can't buy or push our way into the love that God has for us. Our standing in the community makes no difference at all. *What* we know or *who* we know does not make us greater recipients of the grace of God.

But perhaps, we think . . . Perhaps if we worked *really* hard. Perhaps if we fed enough hungry people or sheltered enough homeless or welcomed enough refugees or recovered even more wages for workers, we'd be on the inside track. Perhaps by doing enough of the *right* things, we will enter the realm of heaven before others.

And when the wages are given out, we'd find . . .

Well, we'd find that "When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage."

We would find, in short, the grace of God—grace that is amazing, yes, and disturbing and strangely comforting. It is unexpected and maybe not exactly what we would want. God's abundance poured out on everyone, the early risers and the latecomers, the first and the last, free for the taking.

So, this might be about work after all.

"The last will be first and the first will be last."

Even now, those who are paid low wages and even having those wages stolen from them, those who are doing work that no one notices, no one rewards, those who are treated in ways that we would call "unfair"—even now they are participants in God's great reversal. It's happening. It's happening even here in Iowa City. This is what I meant when I said that our support of the Center for Worker Justice is not a solution to all of the problems faced by workers in our community. But it is a *sign* that the realm of heaven is coming near, that difficult, life-denying, soul-destroying situations can turn around.

It can happen for other people.

It can happen for you.

So, this is even about our work, your work.

The good news is this: we can let up on our earnest striving. We can do our best, give our utmost—and then let it be. That is to say, we can work with grace. Our work can be a channel toward life.

Look at your calendar. It says volumes about your spiritual condition, your values, fears, and ambitions. It tells who your bosses are, whom you love, and how much value you place on your soul. It tells you what is first and what is last in your own life.

One minister wrote these words to other ministers: “If you fill your calendar with important appointments you will have no time for God. If you fill your spare time with essential reading you will starve your soul. If you fill your mind with worry about budgets and offerings, the pains in your chest and the ache in your shoulders will betray you. If you try to conform to the expectations of those around you, you will be forever their slave. Work a modest day then step back and rest. This will keep you close to God.”<sup>iv</sup>

The advice? “Take a long, prayerful, meditative look at your planner. Who are you trying to impress? God? Give me a break. Your congregation? Possibly. Yourself? Bingo.”

The suggestion? “Now, cut some big chunks out of each week for family, rest, meditation, prayer, and flower sniffing. When you’ve done that, we’ll talk more about the path to God.”

It’s advice for clergy because we can overwork along with the best workaholics. But this is also sound advice for anyone who finds work can overshadow life.

Cut some big chunks out of each week for family, rest, meditation, prayer, and flower sniffing.

Be open to the grace of God in your work and in the rest of your life.

If you have been working hard, if you are worn out—God offers you grace and rest.

If you have arrived later in the day— God offers you grace and rest.

To each of us—to all of us—God offers the same generous wages, the same unconditional love, the same grace.

All you have to do is reach out and take it.

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<sup>i</sup> Frederick Borsch, *Many Things in Parables*, pg. 33.

<sup>ii</sup> Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, pg. 55-56.

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 33.

<sup>iv</sup> William Martin, *The Art of Pastoring*, pg. 9.