



Who Can Be Saved?

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 20:1-16

July 11, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Sally S. Wright

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When 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.' 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. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, '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.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last. [Matthew 20:1-16]

Did you hear the Good News in there? All the laborers were paid. Or maybe, like me, you are not sure that is Good News. The laborers who started

out at the beginning of the day and have worked all day receive the same pay as the laborers who started an hour before closing time. They worked for more hours and less pay. We can understand why the laborers are upset. That doesn't seem right.

We are six weeks into a sermon series about parables. We know that a parable's story is never the real story. There is always more to the story.

On the surface, this parable seems to be about fair wages, an honest day's work, and generous landowners. What if I said this parable is really answering a question that comes from an earlier chapter of Matthew asking, "Are we saved?" The stakes of the conversation just jumped higher. No longer are we debating fair wages, what generosity looks like, and what an honest day of work looks like. Suddenly, we are thrust into a conversation with Jesus about eternal life.

This whole passage starts earlier in the book—around the middle of chapter 19. It seems as if Jesus and his followers were hanging out talking about eternal life. What leads up to this parable is the story about the rich man who wants to have eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, which the rich man has done. Then Jesus tells him to sell all his possessions and give the money away. The rich man goes off saddened. Then the disciples pick up the conversation and ask, "Are we saved?" Jesus' response is, "It is impossible for humans but nothing is impossible with God." Peter, the ever practical one asks, "So, then what will we have as a reward?" Jesus' response? "You will have eternal life." And then Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story about the way the kingdom of heaven works." Cue our parable for today about laborers getting hired at different times of day and getting paid the same wage. What is your read on that?

Last week, Pastor Tom mentioned a 2015 New York Times Magazine article by Colson Whitehead discussing the “Winner Edit” and “Loser Edit.” It is an article asserting that reality TV is popular because it places the viewer in the role of judge. The viewer deduces who will be kicked off each episode because the viewer sees all of the mistakes that the loser makes—because the producers create that storyline. Yet, the viewer *also* gets a sense for who will win because the winner gets the Winner Edit and is cast as a hero. Reality-TV producers and editors make the viewer feel as if the viewer can deem who is worthy to win and who needs to be kicked off the show. Worthy or unworthy. We, as the viewer, love to pick out who is worthy for the reward and, by default, who is unworthy. Don’t we love to place judgement on people and things?

In our day-to-day life, placing value and worth on ideas, projects and people is how we make business happen. For example, if we hire 2 FTEs for the project, will we get the return on that investment or will it be sunk cost? The answer to that question can have big consequences. Or even something like: If we put mother in the facility that is closer to the house but a little more expensive, will we be able to spend more time with her? Or: Is it worth getting take-out on the way home rather than taking the time to cook dinner? These are real questions with real-life consequences. Of course we know how to place worth and value on things. So what is the problem? The problem lies when we believe we know who God deems as worthy or unworthy.

This parable points to a God who will give a fair wage—even if the whole day has not been worked—because that was the agreement. This parable draws a picture for us that there may be a time where there is room in the vineyard for all the workers, even the ones who are late because they are ill, injured, have family issues, or might even have been drunk the night before—because that’s what may be happening with the laborers who are still there midday and mid-afternoon.

In this parable, there doesn’t seem to be a Winner Edit and a Loser Edit. There doesn’t seem to be an edit at all. Perhaps this parable is pointing to a world where people are welcomed to the vineyard even if

they are late or have had any number of Loser Edit-worthy experiences.

Because you see, the God this parable points to is the God who knew us before we were formed in our mother’s womb and who knows every hair on our head. There is a God who may even let us come to work in the vineyard even though we are ill, late, struggling with anxiety or depression, burned out, under-performing, too old or too young... how would you finish this list?

You might think this type of parable is only for ancient texts. Yet, having flown recently, I think that I spotted a glimpse of this type of parable-thinking in the real world. Have you ever flown Southwest Airlines?

They have an atypical boarding routine. The kingdom of heaven could be like an airline, who loads its passengers in three groups. Those that paid more money are called as Boarding Group A. The first 15 have paid more to be able to choose their seats first; others have paid money to have the computer check them in. After those in Group A have boarded, the 60 people in Group B are called. Finally, after everyone else has boarded, those remaining in Group C are called to board and find those center seats that no one really likes. When the doors are closed, the pilot takes off for the destination. Once they land, those who paid the most money have not arrived any sooner than those who were last in line. And many times, when I’ve been in the C group, I have felt grateful that I was even on the plane in the first place—center seat or not.

Could it be that our God will get everyone to their destination regardless of when they boarded or how much they paid? Those who paid less money are not any less worthy of getting to the destination (safely) than those who paid more.

Or, here’s another one. The kingdom of heaven is like a family, who every Saturday would make sandwiches and snacks, grab clean socks, and head out into the alleys of the city to bring meals and clean socks to those that were experiencing a hard time. Singer, songwriter, and composer Gregory Porter’s mother would do just that. When Gregory Porter was young, his mother would take him to find the people who were in need of food, clothing—those

whom had become addicted to drugs and alcohol. They would give what they could—some food, some clothes, or a kind conversation. They were communicating worth to each of these persons. Perhaps the ones in the alley were some of the laborers who showed up to work at the end of the day?

God calls us to work in the vineyard to bring about the kingdom. To bring up there down here. We pray this every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." We have been called to do the work of God. This parable is a reminder that others, too, have been promised a full measure of God's grace. We need not grumble about when they started working. We remember that everyone is worthy of God's grace and that it is God's to give, not ours. We are called to do the work of the kingdom and let God do the work of God.

I'll tell you that the God that I choose to believe in is the God who deems everyone worthy. Now, I

know for those of you wondering if I am going to say that everyone is saved... I want to believe in that God. But I also hold that God is God alone. God knows who is saved. That is not for me to worry about.

So I invite you to join me in treating everyone as if they are worthy of God's grace. Treat everyone as if they are a laborer in the field. Treat everyone as if they are on a journey to a destination. Treat everyone as if God has made a place in God's vineyard for them.

You and I can pronounce judgment on a lot of things in this world. Yet, God is the one who decides about the next. So let us live into the day where there is enough work in the field for everyone.

We pray this in the name of the God who formed you, who loved you into being, and calls you to love others. Amen.