

## “Vineyard Chatter”

Gates Presbyterian Church

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### Matthew 20:1-16

There's a lot of grumbling going on in scripture readings today – gripe, gripe, gripe. ... First we heard the grumbings of the Israelites. Moses and Aaron got quite an ear full. The people were hungry and their complaints were loud – even to the point of wishing they were still in Egypt. I'd be willing to bet that Moses and Aaron had moments of wishing they were back in Egypt also.

And again in the second reading in Matthew– the workers were complaining and to be honest – on first reading, it strikes our sense of “fair” also – workers that are in the hot sun working all day, paid the same as workers who have worked only an hour – what that's about???? Equal pay for unequal work .....????

What's that about – with a closer look and a little research we discover that it's about God's amazing generosity.

It's harvest season in this Jewish village. The growing season is over, the grapes are ripe, and it is time to pick the grapes from the vine. Soon the rains will come and the harvest will be ruined the grapes are if still on the vines. In other words, it's the eleventh hour. For those of us who don't come from a farming background maybe we can best understand this moment of panic in terms of working late when the financials are due the next morning, or driving to the post office at 11:45 on April 15<sup>th</sup>, or writing the essay on the way to school. Most of us have run the frantic race against the clock. The grapes must be picked - workers are needed – the time is now.

The market places of these villages were the temp agencies of today - places to match the needs of the employer with the skills of the workers. Day workers came to the market looking for employment. Day workers were poor. They lived from one day to the next entirely at the mercy of chance employment. Hunger was so close, that they were willing to stand in the market place all day hoping they might be hired for even an hour.

The landowner in the story arrives early in the morning offering a full days wage for a full days work. He gathers a few fortunate men and takes them to the vineyard. By 9:00, it was obvious more help was needed to meet the harvest deadline. The landowner returns to the market and hires a few more men. This scenario is repeated at noon and again at 3:00 and again at 5:00 – one hour before quitting time. The harvest must have been good – no doubt the landowner was a happy man if not also stressed and tired.

Six o'clock comes. It is the end of the day – the pay line forms. But this is where Jesus throws out the unexpected. Instead of prorated pay based on number of hours worked, all of the workers received the same amount of pay – enough to feed their families for one more day. The tired workers who began at daybreak and worked through the heat of the day weren't too pleased with this untraditional system ..... the vineyard chatter begins ..... the grumbling

grows and the landowner is confronted. We even shake our heads about the fairness of this system. The landowner, however, knows that without the added pay, the late workers will put hungry children to bed.

The defensive words of the landowner ring out through the air “Look I have done nothing wrong. I paid you exactly what we agreed upon. Take your money now and go! Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous.” The story ends and Jesus adds almost incidentally, “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.”

Ah .....Jesus challenges his listeners - take a step outside the usual - look through the eyes of God's - explore God's economy – an economy based on generosity – an economy based on need not greed - enough is enough - excess goes to help those who didn't get enough.

I don't know about you, but I'm challenged also. Work ethic is important to us in this country and fair is fair - study hard, work hard, get ahead, and enjoy the good life. Hard work makes personal life, family life, church life, and community life functionally. I wonder, however, have we, like those workers who worked long hours in the hot sun, slipped into a “we worked harder; thus, we deserve more mode” or even “We have more because we work harder” mode? Have we become more concerned about personal gain than community need? Are we, too, baffled by the fairness issue of this parable? Do we find ourselves on the side of the grumbling workers, yelling “not fair”, or on the side of the landowner concerned with the welfare of all of the workers or on the side of the grateful workers who were given much more than earned. God's amazing generosity is not based on a reward system, but instead, on love. There is no “deserve” in the kingdom of heaven. How could any of us do enough to earn or deserve the love of God? God's generosity!

The last several weeks have been horrendous for our country. I have heard folks claim that Hurricane Katrina was a result of God's wrath. I absolutely don't believe that! The whys of the occurrence of this powerful hurricane are to be found in the studies of the meteorologists. There are many “why” questions involved in this tragedy – some are political whys, personal whys, medical whys, etc. but one, I believe is a faith “why?” And it is not about God's wrath, but instead about God's call to justice. As Christians we should be asking, “Why is there the kind of poverty we witnessed in the richest nation in the world?”

Now, don't misunderstand me, I don't believe we witnessed an intentional evil spirited economic and racial bias. I certainly don't think anyone said those poor black folks are not worth saving; I do however, believe we witnessed an unintentional bias – one that evolved out of ignorance. When an automobile dependant disaster evacuation plan is developed for a city where 30 percent of the folks live below the poverty line, one can only conclude that there is much to be learned about poverty. The events of this tragedy challenge each of us to take off our blinders to poverty. Like the landowner – to recognize the struggles of the poor – to say enough is enough – let's share the wealth.

Are we guilty of the grumbings of those that were hired first – we work hard, we deserve to earn more. Those grumbings overlook a simple truth. For a multitude of reasons, some people do not have the opportunity to be part of the work hard system – often, like in our parable, it is because of uncontrollable circumstances – the luck of the draw – they weren't selected for the morning work team. The reality is that when we set ourselves apart as deserving, we are guilty

of creating a divide – those that deserve vs. those that do not. Jesus’ parable makes it absolutely clear. In God’s economy, there is not such a thing as deserve and or not. God’s economy is about everyone receiving the gifts of God – because frankly, that is exactly what they are “gifts” not rewards. We, as a nation, have come eyeball to eyeball with the face of poverty. We have an opportunity to make a life style change as a country. I’m not talking politics – I’m talking faith. As a congregation, we are committed to mission. People like Lorraine Zimmerman model generosity for us. As the program year begins, let us recommit ourselves to life choices that reflect the economy of God. Let us educate ourselves about the root causes of poverty in the United States and the world. Before we consume, let us ask the question, do we already have enough. Let us respectfully use the world’s resources. Let us share ideas that teach our children generosity. The hero in Jesus’ story is a deadline driven, profit margin concerned farmer who still made time, allotted resources, and was determined to recognize human need and respond creatively. God calls us to radical generosity. The time is now.

Amen.