

A Proper 20 20260930
Sunday - Supply at St Timothy's – Herndon - congregation at Shrine Mont retreat
Services – 8am Rite I, 10am HEB - hybrid, live-streamed
Communion – Traditional

Readings –
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 145:1-8
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon

May God's Peace be with you and yours.

Let us pray.

O Eternally Faithful and Loving Teacher,

We are most thankful that you are our guiding voice. We pray for your help in our daily lives to learn and practice discernment to know you are always with us; and to follow your ways rather than blocking you from our hearts when we use only our own ways and judgement. Amen.

You may be seated.

Good morning and welcome, my friends, my siblings in Christ. And welcome to those joining us on the live-stream.

I am so happy that we are here together this morning.

I am the Reverend Philene Ware Dunn. And I am honored to be welcomed to have this privilege of worshiping with all of you today. Thank you.

Now our gospel reading today finishes with a statement that we have heard before in this book – our bible.

The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

And being one whose last name - "Ware" - was at the end of the alphabet, ohhh I would cringe when a teacher would say that – especially when I hadn't done my homework.

And today's gospel reading evokes a familiar outcry that everyone of us has proclaimed since we were little – maybe it was even our next words to speak after learning to say “Mama” and “Dada” –

That's not fair!!!

In fact – I bet many of us still proclaim that today? Am I right? I know I do.

And do you remember the answer to your complaint?

That's right kiddo – life is not fair.

Tough.

Yeah – too bad.

I never liked hearing that. And I still don't.

And the landowner in today's parable responds to the grumbling that it is his choice to decide who gets paid what.

Or how about this one that a friend of mine reminded me from Charles Shulz in the comic strip Peanuts –

If life were fair, we would all die in the order we were born.

But life is not fair.

And this reading causes us to “naturally” respond with the laborers:

That's not fair.

And that is what Jesus does when he tells us a parable. He tells us parables to evoke – to bring to the surface – our responses – our so called “natural” responses - to which we have been conditioned by our cultures. And this parable, the Laborers in the Vinyard, does just that.

My whole working life has been that as a contractor – negotiating a fair wage for each of my labors. I started learning that skill as a baby sitter, then as a contract musician, and a long career as a consultant. And even now – as a supply priest – I am paid by the service.

So, in the gospel lesson we are told a landowner needed laborers to work in his vineyard. And he goes to the marketplace early, early in the morning and hires workers for the “usual daily wage.”

Have you ever done that? Gone to the 7-Eleven or Home Depot to hire someone to help you with a project around the house? And you would reach an agreement to what a fair wage would be – right?

Well - This parable is the same thing.

And each time the landowner needs more hands – even in the last hour of the day - he goes to the marketplace. Hires them, too, for a fair wage – “whatever is right” – even though we are not told what that is.

Now we have been hearing many parables during this season of Pentecost and if there are two things I hope you have figured out about Jesus and his parables:

First – Jesus knows how to tell a story. He is a master storyteller.

And Second – Being a master storyteller – he knows how to set-up the story to always give us a little twist at the end – what I call - a zinger - a gotcha.

And this one is no exception.

Jesus not only wants us to listen to his stories, but he wants us to be challenged and to think. That is right – to be challenged and to think because as we – you and I – are on this journey together learning -- who God is and who we are – especially who we are – or – maybe it would be better to say – who we can be – Jesus is inviting us - to explore – to discover – to learn – even to un-learn – and re-learn - what all this “kingdom of heaven” is about.

Isn't that one of the reasons we have a church – we come here as a community to learn about God and this Kingdom of Heaven, too?

And we get a glimpse of that heaven when we see the laborers being paid the same wage – the final hour worker the same as the early, early morning worker.

And we say – That's not fair!!!

And that is the twist – the zinger – the gotcha - Jesus has challenged us with.

We think – We think – it is not fair.

We think it is not fair because – that is the way we have been taught to think. We have been taught – from the very first time we proclaimed – That's not fair! – we have been taught that we are not – we are not going to live in the kingdom of heaven here in our earthly lives.

Think about that for a moment.

We are taught from our earliest memories that we are going to live and perpetuate a dog-eat-dog world, competing and hoarding - even if it means to the detriment of our neighbors, our community, and even each of ourselves and our loved ones.

If we were to listen to this parable with the ears of the Jews – we would have heard it as an allegory where the Landowner is God and the vineyard is Israel. And the ears of the Jews would hear God calling his people to come and labor in his kingdom.

And if we were to listen with the ears of the early church --- the early, early morning workers would have been the patriarchs on through the prophets with the final hour workers being the disciples of Christ – even the gentiles.

And if we were to listen with our modern day ears – we might hear it as a story about labor relations and fair practices.

And there are many, many more interpretations to this parable.

And I came up with my own interpretation to make this parable seem more fair to my understanding - to understand it in terms of our life-spans – the last are to be first and the first are to be last - the many-hour laborers are the eldest people among us and the final hour worker is the infant with the ever shortness of life. Yet - each enjoys the fullness of God's love and grace – not a fractional amount – but the full measure of eternal dignity, presence, and joy regardless of how many hours on the clock.

And in my interpretation, I find myself most grateful for God's mercy and grace that overall – we are not judged by our standards – but by God's standard.

And what is God's standard? It is the one that sustains my hope – our hope - in our Lord – in which we have been bound together at this font and even this table - That God loves us – each and every one of us – in dignity and respect and joy!

And this standard of love, dignity, respect, and joy – isn't that what we are to do with each other, too? Aren't we also to share God's economy:

- The generous tip to the server despite the mistakes?
- The congratulations to the co-worker who gets the promotion whom you thought is not deserving?
- Or the family member who has not yet "earned" their forgiveness?

Did we not learn in last week's gospel that we are to forgive not 7 times but 77 times?

God does. God does that.

And God lifts each and everyone of us up after every stumble.

That, my friends, is how it works in God's kingdom.

Doesn't that sound fair?

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

The Reverend Philene M Ware Dunn
Sunday, September 20, 2026